

# The War of Tomorrow

by ilmiopassato

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Summary: COMPLETE. Sequel. Just back from fighting battles across the Outer Colony world of Khan, Lieutenant Colonel Natalie Cooper struggles to deal with her inner demons while pursuing a rank up at Earth's prestigious War College. She thinks she's left the fight for good now, but some of the enemies she's faced in the past are ready to return.

## 1. Intro: Not the Teacher's Pet

Author's Note: New story smell! Almost like new car smell, but better. ;)

First off, a big thanks to everybody who's followed me on this writing journey so far. It's because of your support that I find myself continuing these fics, and getting inspired to send my characters off on a new adventure each time around. And if you're new to the series, welcome! Hope you enjoy and stick around for the fun.

Before we begin, some customary disclaimers:

1) I DO NOT OWN Halo, the franchise/the books/the games/other media. I'm just writing a story based off this universe. And, like with the previous installments in the series, times/dates/settings may be slightly AU. If I diverge a bit from canon, it's intentional.

2) Also like its predecessors, this story is rated T but tends to toe the line with M for language, violence, blood, gore, and some suggestive/sexual content (not graphic). You have been warned.

3) While it is not strictly necessary to read the other Cooper stories to understand this one, it is **\*\*highly\*\*** recommended. The fics in this series have built off one another and you'll miss a lot of the character development/story progression if you choose to start here. If you're not sure what order the stories go in, I have them numbered in chronological order on my profile page.

And with that, I bring you story 6 of the Cooper series. Enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><span><strong>Intro: Not the Teacher's Pet<strong>

WARNING! TOP SECRET! EYES ONLY!

SCANNING IN PROGRESSâ€|

â€|CLEARANCE GRANTED

/TO: Lieutenant Colonel Natalie M. Cooper, Commanding Officer 52nd  
Combat Regiment, 1st Marine Division, UNSC Marine Corps

FROM: Major General Nohavi Lotus, Vice Chair of Academics, Pensacola  
Advanced Warfare College, Pensacola, Florida, United States. North  
American Territory, UNSC Marine Corps

SUBJECT: FILE ENCRYPTED

MESSAGE:

Lieutenant Colonel Cooper,

I am writing you to inform you of your subpar performance in  
yesterday's peer review of your tactical analysis for the fictional  
OPERATION: BLITZKRIEG. As per College policy, I have scheduled to  
meet with you tomorrow, Wednesday 12 June, 2558, at 0845 hours to  
discuss this evaluation.

Just to remind you, my office is at 122 Lomund Court, room 33. Do not  
be late. Your future is riding on this.

Major General Nohavi Lotus, Vice Chair of Academics

/END MESSAGE/

## 2. Chapter 1: A Serendipitous Meeting

**\*\*Chapter One: A Serendipitous Meeting\*\***

**\*\* Five Years Earlier. 2256 Hours, February 9, 2553. \*\*UNSC Roosevelt  
Air Base, Skagen, Denmark. "The Outing," Planet Earth. Prologue to  
the War of Tomorrow\*\*\*\***

With our big Africa op just two days away, a night at the O-Club with  
my two best buddies was just what I needed to get my mind off all our  
troubles - and the impending do-or-die moment humanity was about to  
face. Our upcoming mission to Kenya would be our very last, the one  
that either ended the war with the Covies and Flood for good, or made  
it a moot point if Earth was lost.

Of course I had plenty to think about before then - and to prepare,  
and to wring my hands about. Little Gabriel was here with us too now,  
and having just gone through the painful miscarriage of my second  
child, I wanted to spend as much time with my two-and-a-half-year-old  
son as I could. But Willis had agreed to watch him on his own for

tonight, my company of Marines and their supplies were all squared away, and so I was ready to let loose a bit and have some fun.

"So what're you going to do first when we get there, Lewis?" Captain Oliver Hayden, one of my two best friends, asked the other.

Beside me, First Lieutenant Dean Lewis grinned. "Celebrate the birth of my new son, of course."

"Of course! Well, Courtney and I've got three, so that means...three shots to start. Fair?" Oliver turned to me next. "Cooper here's got one so you'll get just one shot. Dean, buddy, I think you should get two though. A second one for your daughter."

I smiled. "So we're toasting to our kids first?"

"Sure, why not? Even though they're an enormous responsibility, we love the little gremlins a lot so they get first pick."

"I'm guessing that means spouses next?"

"Yeah. We love them, too."

"And next to the dead," Lewis added.

"I'll drink to that," I responded softly.

We'd made it to the corner where the O-Club was now, and we could already see the lights on from the outside - and hear all the noise coming from within.

"Come on," Hayden said, grinning. "Last round will be to bolster our resolve for the end of the world."

Once inside, we finally saw that the place was packed. That wasn't unusual just before deployment, but tonight, the atmosphere was different. There was more chaos and less restraint - in a way we all knew that if we made it back from Africa at all, it would be minus many of the people we'd known and had worked with for months or even years. I hated the thought of it, but I looked to my left at Dean and then to my right at Oliver. This might be our very last time alive together.

And we planned to make the most of it.

Captain Hayden sidled up to the bar first, pushing past other clustered groups of officers to order our drinks. "Six shots of the best you've got, for the three amigos," he said to the bartender. The woman nodded and set out two small glasses of a clear liquid for each of us.

Lieutenant Lewis raised an eyebrow at Oliver. "Aren't you supposed to have three for your boys? And one for Natalie for hers?"

Hayden shrugged as he downed his first shot in one quick swill. "I decided to spread around the cheer a little bit, in the interest of fairness."

"Hey, sounds good to me," I said, taking my first shot next. The liquid burned down my throat, but it felt good.

Finally, Lewis joined in with us, letting his first drink go down the hatch.

"To our families," Hayden said.

"To our families," Lewis and I echoed.

"And this next one," Oliver said as he raised his second glass, "will be for the brothers and sisters we've lost...and the many more we'll say goodbye to on this final campaign."

Out of respect, Lieutenant Lewis and I raised our glasses slowly and solemnly. The three of us gave each other a meaningful look in the eyes, as if to say, \_If it's me, remember your good friend when I'm gone.\_ And then we downed our shots in unison.

\* \* \*

><p>Just a half-hour later I was feeling nice and buzzed, nearing the end of my first pint of beer. I signaled the bartender for another, then took my two drinks back to the poker game Hayden, Lewis, and I had decided to crash. Credits were strewn everywhere on the table, our haphazard version of a pot, and things had gotten relaxed enough that we sat in the group with the top buttons of our uniform jackets undone, even in the presence of two majors. Nobody really cared.<p>

I checked out my hand one last time as the game circled back to me. It was just about my turn, but I couldn't help but let out a groan as I finished my beer and started in on the second. My hand was still shit.

Beside me, Hayden laughed.

"You know, Cooper, the whole point of poker is to have \_control\_ over your facial expressions. It's like you're on a stealth mission if you're trying to win. Don't want the enemy to know you're there waiting in the shadows to catch him from behind and shank 'im."

I shook my head, although it felt like the room moved a little with it. "Not my style. I say take the enemy head-on with everything you've got and take 'em by surprise that way."

As soon as the Marine officer on the other side of me, another captain, threw more credits into the pot, I laid my cards flat in front of me and folded.

"It's also a good strategy, however, to know when you've got nothing left to give," I said.

"TouchÃ©." Hayden played his hand and looked over to Lewis, next in the circle. "Well, buddy? Whatcha got?"

It was the final go-around of the game, and Lewis was the last player. His face was a stony façade; there was no getting through that mop of red hair and those blue eyes to reveal what he was thinking.

Finally, though, he grinned.

"Royal flush for you all," he said. "Read it and weep...and give me each of those \_lovely\_ large credit bills."

Several groans went through the table then, but our buddy Lewis was the legitimate winner. Sometimes it paid to have a best friend who was as good at cards as him. As soon as everyone was done protesting the win, Lewis took the wad of cash in his hands, stood a little unevenly, and raised his half-empty glass.

"Next round of brew on me!"

We all raised our glasses in return to that. I hurried to finish my second beer to make way for more, and one of the majors started doling out the cards for another game. Suddenly, though, the whole table went hush and we all abruptly stood.

"Colonel on deck!" someone shouted.

\_Shit,\_ I thought. Technically, by the simple act of unbuttoning our jackets to reveal our T-shirts underneath, we were all out of uniform. A couple of the young second lieutenants with us hurried to straighten themselves out; the rest of us didn't even bother. We knew if this full bird colonel was a real hardass and a stickler for the rules, we were all in for a reprimand anyway.

The colonel who'd just entered was a man in his mid-forties with salt-and-pepper hair. He had a medium build and stood tall at six-foot-three, an imposing figure to most of us. We all stood at attention in absolute silence as he walked around, almost as if he were inspecting the place. Maybe he was. I was ready to get the chewing out of my life when he finally addressed the bar patrons and grinned.

"A round for all the Marines we've got in here! Enjoy, everyone. The next two days won't be easy...and anything after that is not guaranteed. Drink up."

Cheers and whoops sounded throughout the crowd, and our table cheered even louder. Between Lewis and the colonel, we were getting our next two drinks free. Couldn't ask for much more than that.

"That guy," Hayden said then, "is a fucking hero."

"Yes, Oliver, we know," Lewis replied. "We're all going to get back very drunk tonight."

"No, I'm serious! You ever hear about the siege on Beijing a few weeks ago? That dude."

I almost spit out my beer. "Really? You're sure?"

"Dead on," Hayden affirmed. "He stopped a whole damn Covenant army in China to save the city. Pretty badass."

"Glad he's going in with us, then," I said.

"Yeah, me - oh, shit! Here he comes."

The full bird colonel had finally made his way to our table then

after speaking to some of the other Marine officers in the O-Club, drink in hand. Without a word, a couple of the second lieutenants quickly made room for him and he sat down.

After taking a long swig of his beer, he said, all casual, "So. Let's start with some introductions. I'm Colonel Aiden Bolowsky. You, Lieutenant Red?"

We all looked over at Dean. He was the only one at the table with red hair. Hell, probably the only Marine in the whole bar.

"First Lieutenant Dean Lewis, sir. XO of Bravo Company, 102nd Battalion."

"Who's your CO?"

"Me, sir," I responded. "I'm Captain Natalie Cooper. And this is our buddy, Captain Oliver Hayden. He's in charge of Charlie Company in the same battalion, sir."

Colonel Bolowsky nodded with his beer. "Good to meet you, Marines. And the others?"

We went around the circle till the introductions were finished. After that the O-6 sat in on two games of cards with us - and went through two beers. I finally stopped halfway through my third, though more was offered. I didn't want to get completely plastered tonight when I was going back home to my son - even though Willis and I had already put him to bed long before I'd left.

It was close to 0300 hours when Hayden, Lewis, and I decided to call it quits and return to our respective quarters. Throughout the walk, Oliver talked mostly about the colonel we'd met.

"Man, that guy was cool. Everything a superior officer should be, plus he knows when to unwind. I like it." He paused for a moment, then added, "I hope I'm like that when I make full colonel."

Beside us, Dean snorted. "As long as you're fantasizing, you can wish for the Covenant to peacefully depart the planet as well."

"Yeah," I chimed in. "And the Flood. That way we can all sleep in tomorrow morning instead of having to get up in three hours for formation."

That elicited a collective groan from the three of us.

We walked along for several minutes in silence after that. We were almost to the barracks when Lewis spoke again.

"I know who might make it that far up the ranks." He turned and glanced at me with a smile. "Our very own Cooper here."

"Nah," I said. "Not in a million years. I'm still sometimes surprised I made captain already."

"Sure you can, Natalie," Hayden said then, serious for once in his life. "Out of all of us, you just might be the one to make it."

### 3. Chapter 2: Checking In

#### **\*\*Chapter Two: Checking In\*\***

\*\*\*\*Present Day. 0630 Hours, June 12, 2558. Cooper-Hawk Residence, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Missed Connection," Planet Earth. Prologue to the War of Tomorrow\*\*\*\*

I woke up to the sound of the alarm blaring and snuggled closer to the warm body beside me out of reflex, eyes still closed. It took an extra second but then I felt Willis stir, too. He mumbled something incoherent and rolled over to turn the alarm off before facing me again.

"Better get up, Coop," he said to me, his voice thick with sleep. "It's time for school."

I groaned into my pillow. "Me or the kids?"

"Both."

I peeked over at him with only one eye open. "You enjoy saying that, don't you?"

He smirked back at me. "Maybe a little. It's kinda funny at our age."

My husband pulled me in for a morning kiss then that somehow didn't stop at one. I kissed him back a second time, then a third when our four-year-old twins came running through the once-closed door and into the room.

"Eww!" Olivia shouted, making a disgusted face. "Mommy and Daddy are kissing!"

"Yeah? You better hope I don't catch you and give you kisses, too."

I got up out of bed and quickly wrangled my daughter into my grasp, then started planting little kisses all over her face. Olivia squirmed and giggled in delight. It was pretty clear by the time we'd gotten home about a month and a half ago that our kids had missed us as much as we'd missed them while we'd been gone on our mission to Khan. There I'd learned a lot of things about the true state of the universe, and about myself as well. Things I was still trying to come to terms with now.

But for the moment, those issues were the furthest thing from my mind. After a minute I let go of Olivia and went after Liam, my youngest son, next, and gave him the same treatment. We'd heard from Willis's parents that he'd had the most difficult time with our absence, and he seemed most excited to have us back. I kissed my little man on his cheeks and his forehead and his short brown hair, the same color as mine, then grabbed both twins and brought them over onto the bed with us so they could have some time with their dad. Willis gave them both a kiss on the top of their heads and a big squeeze. After that the twins finally settled down a bit and lay there for a while, sandwiched in between us, looking content.

"Hey," I asked them then. "Where's your big brother?"

"Still sleeping," Olivia responded. "We tried to go into his room but he was \_snoring\_."

Our oldest son, Gabriel, now eight, didn't really snore - but he was a heavy sleeper. Getting him up and ready in the morning was always a tough task. It was a good thing I'd built a career on those.

"Well, we'll have to go wake him up soon," Willis said. "It's almost time for your mom to leave for school."

Olivia and Liam giggled.

"That's silly," my son said. "Why does Mommy have to go to school?"

I glanced over at my husband and gave him a look. "See? Now you've got them saying it, too."

Willis just grinned. "Your mom has to go to school so she can get to the next level in the Marines. War College is really hard. You have to be one of the best to even go there."

Our daughter looked up at me. "Are you one of the best, Mommy?"

"We'll see," I replied. "There's a lot of really smart people there, and they're all a lot older and more experienced than me."

And then there was that message I'd gotten from the Vice Chair the other day. Definitely not something that made me feel like attending War College was the right thing to do. It was an honor to get selected, but sometimes I felt like I was drowning in the deep end. I had no idea what the instructors or my classmates had thought I'd done wrong in my analysis. I guess in a couple more hours, I'd find out.

"Come on, guys," I said to the twins. "Let's go get your brother up and we'll all get ready for school."

\* \* \*

><p>Given that this was my kids' last week of school before they were out for the summer, I took extra care in making sure they had everything they needed for the day. After that I scrambled into the shower, pulled on my uniform, scarfed down a quick breakfast, and downed my birth control pills and my PTSD meds with my coffee. Then I walked over to Willis as I rushed out the door to say goodbye.<p>

"You sure you're all set?" he asked me.

"Yeah. I have to hurry now. I've got the meeting with the Vice Chair in about an hour."

"Good luck, Cooper. I'm sure you'll do fine. And don't worry, I promise I'll get the kids to school on time."

"Thanks. I'll see you guys later tonight."



After I leaned in to kiss him, Willis kissed me back and whispered, "You're a good leader, Natalie. Don't let them tell you otherwise. Just show them all you've done for your Marines over the years. And remember that one bad eval isn't going to make or break you."

I appreciated the sentiment, but I still found myself frowning. "That's not what it sounded like in the message. 'Your future is riding on this'? Sounds pretty ominous to me."

"Maybe he meant it in the general sense. Just go talk to him and see."

"All right. See you later, Will. I love you."

"I love you, too."

And with that I left the house.

\* \* \*

><p>The extra hour I had on my hands after getting myself and the kids ready this morning wasn't just time for me to kill. Before my meeting with the Vice Chair - and before I resumed my classes for the rest of the day, provided I wasn't kicked out of the College - I had to go check in on the regiment. During my six-month deployment to Khan, I'd not only received a promotion from major to lieutenant colonel after leading two battalions into battle against the Storm - one of them mine, the other my late best friend Oliver Hayden's - but I'd also become commander of the 52nd Combat Regiment later on in the campaign, when yet another battalion was added to my roster and we'd encountered a second, new enemy to fight.<p>

The Prometheans were formidable foes, like the Storm, but were something like robotic AIs rather than aliens. I'd also found out that many of them were former humans, transformed into their current forms by an ancient race called the Forerunner when the Flood had been on the verge of taking over all life. I understood the desperation of fighting the parasite - I'd done so myself during the latter part of the War - but knowing the Prometheans had once been people was a disheartening idea for me. There was nothing about them anymore that suggested any sort of consciousness, or any sort of humanity. It was just lost, and to me, that sounded a lot like getting consumed by the Flood. The end result looked about the same.

Thankfully, though, we'd stopped the Prometheans from reaching Earth through a hidden portal on Khan. That was the good news. The bad news was that I'd had to order nearly forty of my Marines to their deaths when we'd blown the portal up, with only my younger brother Travis living to tell the tale. He'd been in bad shape when I'd found him amongst the rubble down on the beach, but now, almost three months later, he was physically all healed up. Mentally, the emotional scars of losing his entire demolition team were still something he struggled with - and something I tried to help him overcome when I could.

The decision had left its own mark on me, too. One that I still hadn't fully gotten over myself yet, either.

"Good morning, ma'am," my XO, Major Dani Brewer, said to me with a

salute as I approached the grounds where my men and women were gathered. "Here for the morning inspection?"

I chuckled as I saluted back. "More or less. At ease, Major. What do we have on tap for today?"

"A smorgasbord of fun and games, Colonel," Brewer answered, grinning. "Just had the company commanders send their Marines out for some calisthenics and a nice long run, then they all hit the showers and the chow hall. The battalions are getting assembled again now for weapons training, and then we'll finish up with a live-fire exercise in the afternoon. Full day."

"Sounds good," I replied. I looked over at my XO and put my hand on her shoulder. "You're doing a great job, Dani. I'm sorry you've had to take on the brunt of the work lately, but you know I'm always here to help. If there's anything you come across that you can't tackle on your own, just let me know and I'll try to slip out of class a little early."

The major nodded. "I will, ma'am. We sure miss your presence out there in the field. But what you're doing is important, and it's not an opportunity to miss. A lot of officers spend a lifetime trying to get into this War College. I'll do what I can to make sure you're able to give it its due attention."

"Thanks. I appreciate that." Before I went over to speak to the other officers, I asked, "Feel good to be back?"

"Yes, ma'am. I get to be with my daughter every day when I get home, and that's about all I can ask for."

"Yeah," I said with a small smile. "I have to admit I like having a full house to go home to, too. You and Cal still doing okay?"

Brewer's expression suddenly changed to an uncomfortable one. "We're...at a weird place right now. I'm sure he'll talk to you about it when he's feeling up to it. I guess we're both just trying to digest right now and figure out what to do."

I had no idea what that meant, but I wasn't going to pry. Last I'd heard everything was smooth sailing in my XO's romance with the spook we'd been working with on Khan and my good friend, Navy Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd. I guess somewhere in between, things had started to go south. I spoke to Cal pretty often, though, so I was sure the situation would get cleared up soon.

"Well, I'll leave you to it then, Dani. I'm going to go talk to Majors Harris and Mullen, and then I'll check in on some of the other junior officers and enlisted Marines, too. After that, I've got a meeting with the Vice Chair and it's back to hitting the books."

"Right. Good luck, Colonel."

"Yeah. You, too, Major."

### **\*\*Chapter Three: High-Priced Tutelage\*\***

After stopping by the base to make sure my regiment was squared away, my next stop was the hallowed grounds of Earth's Pensacola War College. I'd only started studying here a couple weeks ago at the beginning of June, as courses could be taken all year round thanks to the officers' varying deployment and training schedules. I'd liked the change of pace so far; I'd met some very intelligent and tactically sound Marines, older men and women with stories about the earlier years of the Human-Covenant War, and sometimes even before that. I'd been two years away from even being born when the Covies had first attacked Harvest, so it was amazing to me to get to speak to a few people who'd actually been there at the start.

The courses were fun for the most part, too. I'd always enjoyed learning, but I had to admit that the classroom training was less exciting to me than the practical, hands-on applications we were taught. My favorite activities so far were the field exercises, where the instructors did what they could to put everything we'd learned in our textbooks and lectures into practice in a training scenario. Those I was good at.

Unfortunately, what I was being called in for today was the latest classroom exam we'd taken, in which we'd had to write a detailed after-action report on how we'd gone about tackling the made-up OPERATION: BLITZKRIEG as field commanders. I didn't see anything wrong with what I'd written, but obviously my higher-ups and peers did. I was curious to find out what.

As I passed the two enlisted Marine guards at the gate, I showed them my ID and said, "Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. Student 056-A."

The senior MP, a gunnery sergeant, quickly nodded me through. "Go ahead, ma'am. We recognize you."

I walked past them then and onto the campus, for lack of a better word. Everywhere across the grounds, there were signs of the College's rich history - plaques in memory of important battles against the first generation of rebels, plaques commemorating the formation of the United Nations Space Command several centuries ago, and plaques depicting major battles humanity had fought against the Covenant. There were also a few statues erected here and there throughout the inside halls as well as the outside walkways, portraying likenesses of the school's most accomplished alumni.

Everything about the place had an air of importance and prestige. It made me feel lucky to be here.

Today, though, all I saw around me just made me feel inadequate. The fact that I had my meeting with the Vice Chair in just a few more minutes really hammered home the idea that maybe I didn't really belong here quite yet.

It was that sobering thought that followed me as I stepped into the building and exchanged pleasantries with the secretary there, a young first lieutenant who clearly would have liked any assignment other than keeping the major general's appointment book. The O-2 had a full head of auburn hair and dark brown eyes, and looked to be in his

early twenties. If I were him, knowing there was fighting going on just outside the Inner Colonies that I wasn't a part of, I would've absolutely hated that job.

"Major General Lotus will be out in just a moment, ma'am," he said to me.

"No worries, Lieutenant," I replied. "I'm not exactly itching to go in there so he can take his time."

A ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. "Not many are, ma'am. It's usually not a good thing to be seeing him."

"Right."

"Shit. I uh...I meant no offense, Colonel."

I waved off his embarrassment. "It's okay. I guess I'm the problem child of the week."

The lieutenant grinned wider this time, but quickly wiped any traces of amusement off his face when the office door swung open to reveal Major General Lotus himself. I stood up in an instant at rigid attention, staring straight ahead.

"Sir."

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," he said, without a hint of inflection in his voice. "At ease. Good to see you here at 0845 on the dot. That bodes well." The major general gestured to his door. "If you would."

I followed him through the threshold as his secretary stood and shut the door behind us. We sat on opposite sides of his desk and I waited to be reprimanded for...whatever it was I'd done.

The major general interlocked his fingers in front of him on the desk, then released a sigh. "You know what we're here to discuss this morning?"

"Yes, sir. My analysis of Operation Blitzkrieg."

"Correct." He pulled out his datapad from his breast pocket and frowned. "The synopsis of the operation states that you're in charge of four Marine battalions and are planning an assault on a large alien fortification that houses twice as many units. No room for vehicles. Most chose to go about that the right way - the prudent way. Send out a company to scout, get a read on their defenses and patrol routes, and try to wait in the treeline to take them down a few units at a time until you can overpower their forces. You, Colonel, chose something else."

"Yes, sir. I sent out a scout team, had them place charges around the structure without getting caught, and had them blow the place to hell. Then we take care of the stragglers. No casualties, and no waiting. Sir."

"The problem with that is you rely on too many things to go your way," he stated. "Who's to say your men won't get caught, and your presence discovered? Why use so few of your resources when you have

many more at your disposal? What if the charges don't go off?"

"Sir, if I may, I view this a little differently. Why should I use everything I have when it's not necessary for the job? Why put more Marines in harm's way when it can be accomplished in half the time with many less lives at stake?" I shook my head. "I'll always put the mission first, sir - and if need be, throw each and every bullet, 'Hog, tank, and Marine at the enemy as I can. But not when I don't have to."

The major general digested that for a minute, then leaned back in his chair and rubbed at his forehead. "The truth is, Colonel, that the basic model for going about an operation like this is thoroughly explained in the textbook loaded on your datapad. Did you not read the section?"

I almost scoffed, but then remembered myself and swallowed it down. "I did, sir. But you and I both know 'textbook' maneuvers don't count for shit in the field, sir. I could spend all day detailing the perfect outcome of a mission on paper, and it won't guarantee me anything but a revision on the fly once the fighting starts."

"Colonel, that is not - "

"Look, I used this tactic on Khan just three months ago," I said then. "Not even. We had...some serious threats to deal with out there, and we could've spent ages tiptoeing around them and worrying about them, like the rebels chose to do, or face them head-on and do something about it. Something the enemy won't expect. And what the enemy wasn't expecting out there was that we'd just detonate what was too risky to try to maintain control over instead of slowly fight and die over it to keep it intact."

Major General Lotus looked me in the eyes. "You're talking about the portals you and your Marines found. The ones you subsequently ordered gone."

I tried to cover up my surprise but wasn't fast enough. "Yes, sir."

"I've read the report, Colonel. All of it. As Vice Chair of this College, there's not much my clearance level won't allow me to access. And it's good to know where your students are coming from. Both tactically and mentally."

"Sir?"

"It seems to me that the risks you take are too great, Cooper. You have good instincts, but you tend to rely on chance to attain your desired outcome, and don't spend enough time thinking through other possibilities. You may have had the recommendations of Rear Admiral Dartmouth and Captain Rhodes to attend here, and you've accomplished much at your age. All very impressive credentials. But you're still very young and new to your rank in comparison to your peers, and it shows. They wouldn't try even half of what you deem fine, or even correct. That worries me."

I opened my mouth to speak, but he raised his hand to stop me. "As the person in charge of determining whether you're made of the proper

material to go out and command your Marines the right way as a full colonel, I have to ensure that you're willing to learn."

"I am, sir. I just - "

"Then you cannot just dismiss what we teach you as ultimately insignificant in a real battle."

I frowned and said nothing. After a moment, Major General Lotus went on.

"I'll allow you to remain our student for now. But I want to see progress, Colonel, and more applications of what we're trying to teach you - not what you think is better. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Then you're dismissed, Marine."

\* \* \*

><p>I spent most of the day after that quietly fuming to myself as I went through my classes, mandatory weapons training to keep our skills sharp, and later gym hour. We were supposed to go for long runs on our own in the mornings, something I did every day except for one out of the week - which had been this morning for me - but our time in the gym was meant for strength training and conditioning. I worked out hard doing sit-ups, pull-ups, and push-ups before heading to the treadmill since I'd skipped my morning run. I was planning on running off all my frustrations at the close-minded faculty here, but a voice broke into my thoughts after I'd been on a few minutes.<p>

"Ma'am?" one of the other students, a major by the gold oak leaf insignia stenciled onto the front of his PT shirt, said to me. "Are you Lieutenant Colonel Cooper?"

Instead of answering, I pointed to the front of my own T-shirt, which clearly had a silver oak leaf and the name "COOPER" stenciled across it. The major turned red.

"Oh, right. Sorry, ma'am. You are. I'm Major Justin Delaney. I think I'm going to be your XO for the field exercise tomorrow."

"You think or you know, Major?"

"I know, ma'am. I looked at the roster."

"Good. Then we'll talk tomorrow. I'm kind of in the middle of something."

"I can see that, ma'am," he pressed. "But I just wanted to say I liked the way you handled Blitzkrieg. Very bold, and unique. Not the way most of the officers here would think to do it."

"Really? The brass sure didn't seem too impressed."

"Yes, ma'am. I can see how you earned yourself a battlefield promotion. I never did, so I'm here trying to make your pay

grade."

I snorted. "The pay's nice, but you might change your mind once you actually have to do the job. It's not as glamorous as it looks." I stuck out my hand while continuing to run. "But good luck. Delaney, huh? Nice to meet you."

He took my hand with a smile and shook it. "You, too, Colonel. I look forward to the exercise tomorrow."

\* \* \*

><p>Later in the evening, once classes were all done for the day, I returned to my regimental office on base. I wanted to check up on what the 52nd had been up to while I'd been gone. I was happy to see that most of the training had gone well. Few Marines were still out on medicals, and there'd been no accidents from the live-fire practice. At least I had some good news to end the day with.<p>

I was reaching over to power down the holoscreen when I heard a knock on the door.

"Enter," I said.

"Ma'am," my new aide, Staff Sergeant Derek Lynch, promoted since our escapades on Khan, said. "Lieutenant Lloyd is here to see you."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You're still here, Staff?"

"Yes, ma'am. Major Brewer said you'd be coming in after your classes."

I smiled a little to myself as my aide stood with his hands clasped behind his back. We'd only been paired up for a few months, but it seemed my XO already knew me pretty damn well. She'd known I'd come in to make sure my Marines were squared away before going home, regardless of the fact that I trusted her to do a good job in my absence. Ultimately the 52nd Regiment was still my responsibility, and that wasn't something I was going to skimp out on. "She did, huh? Well, she was right. Go ahead and send Lloyd in."

"Right away, Colonel."

It'd been a while since I'd seen the spook last. He was always off on some mission or another, and had spent nearly a week getting debriefed in Sydney when we'd finally gotten back to Earth in late April. I wondered if that might've been where his problems with Brewer arose - though his missions were usually short, they were classified to most and made for a hectic schedule.

The thought was fleeting, though. Mostly I had my former aide, Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter, enter my mind every time I saw Lynch walk in instead of him. I'd worked with the loyal Porter for several years before he'd gotten killed in the fighting on Khan - just as the battle was about to get wrapped up. The staff sergeant had jumped on an enemy grenade for me, and saved my life. I'd always known I'd do anything for my Marines, but to have my aide do that for me...that was something else I carried with me all the time. I knew I was here because of him.

I didn't have much time to keep ruminating after that. Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd walked in, shut the door behind himself, and stood at attention.

"Ma'am, Lieutenant - "

I waved my hand at him to stop. "Come on in, Cal, and have a seat. You don't need to do that with me."

"Yes, ma'am."

As he took his place in the chair opposite my desk, I pulled out an old bottle of brandy from underneath the table. It was the one the rebel leader/town mayor on Khan had given me just before we'd left. Very good stuff, and already more than halfway gone.

"I haven't seen you in a few weeks," I said. "I thought we could both use a drink to celebrate your return."

His smile was only reaction rather than a genuine feeling. "Sure. Although I won't be staying long."

"How come?"

"Dani...uh, Major Brewer..." He scratched at his head. "I'm not sure if she's told you yet, but we're sort of on the rocks."

Once I finished pouring a few fingers of the amber liquid into two glasses - one for him, and one for me - I took a sip and glanced over at him. "She mentioned something about it to me this morning, but didn't go into detail. What happened?"

The ONI operative took a fortifying gulp and answered quickly, "I asked her to marry me."

I almost choked on my drink. "Wow. That was fast."

"I know. Maybe too fast. She said no."

"Shit, Cal. I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, me, too." He released a sigh. "Maybe it's soon, but I love her, Colonel. And now that I've met her daughter since we've gotten back, I've found I really like the kid. I know I can be a good father to her."

"Do you guys get along well?"

"I think so. Alexis seems to like me, too. But now I feel like I'm losing the family I wanted, and I don't - I don't get why Dani's doing this."

I took another drink from my cup and swirled the remainder around, placing the edge of the tumbler on the desk. "Well, obviously the only one who can answer that question is Brewer herself. As a mother myself, though, I know I'd want to dot all my i's and cross all my t's when it came to letting someone get close to my kids. She may just want you to take more time to bond with her daughter first, make sure you guys really connect."



"Yeah, but...she hasn't really spoken to me much since she turned me down. I want to give her her space if she needs time to figure things out, but I also don't want to be wasting our time if she knows it's not going to work."

Finishing the last of the brandy in my glass, I let out a sigh myself and looked him in the eyes. "My advice? Now that you're here, go talk to her. I'm thinking it's probably not unusual for things to cool down for a while when someone pops the question and doesn't get the response they were hoping for. But I can't answer this stuff for you, or for her. Go see her."

Lloyd sat there a moment longer, taking in what I'd said. After a minute he downed the rest of his drink, too, and nodded. "Okay. You're right, ma'am. Dani's the only one who can say for sure what's going on. Thanks."

He stood and turned to leave then, but I stopped him.

"Hey, Cal?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You're a good guy. As long as you don't do anything stupid to screw it up, I think you guys should be able to work this out. Good luck."

"Thank you."

As soon as he'd left, I reached beneath my desk again and poured myself a second hearty glass of the imported brandy from Roost. Today had been a really weird day.

## 5. Chapter 4: Getting There

**\*\*Chapter Four: Getting There\*\***

**\*\*1142 Hours, June 13, 2558. Pensacola War College Training Grounds, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Scenario," Planet Earth. Prologue to the War of Tomorrow\*\***

As I stood on the hillside about a quarter of a klick from the army of Marines moving into the valley below, dressed in full gear with a battle rifle slung behind my back, I watched their progress through my field binoculars, wishing I could be down there with them. These weren't men and women from my actual unit, the 52nd Regiment, though, but only holographic representations of four battalions of Marines - complete with three M808 Scorpion Main Battle Tanks slowly moving up their flanks for extra firepower.

Yet although there were no people on this battlefield, I still knew that someday soon, if all went right, they would be - and that I'd be the one leading them. So I treated this like any other op I did in real life and pretended we were playing for keeps.

"Marines are on the move, ma'am," Major Justin Delaney said beside me. "We're getting close to the objective now. They should hit hostile territory in another two hundred meters."

"Okay. I got that. Let's see what the instructors throw at us."

Delaney scratched at the side of his head, where his short brown curls peeked out from beneath his helmet. "Probably won't be pretty if you went and saw the Vice Chair yesterday. They'll want to really test your skills today, Colonel."

I released a small sigh as I let my binoculars drop and hang from the strap around my neck. "Don't I know it, Major. But we'll be ready for them."

Having to stay this far out of the fight made me anxious, even if it was just holograms. It felt wrong to me, and very different from how I'd approached almost any other encounter in the past. I'd always been part of the chaos, if not at the very front; now I was going to have to learn to take an even bigger step back than I had when I'd made lieutenant colonel. It made me a little restless.

\_Come on,\_ I thought to myself. \_I know this isn't going to be smooth sailing all the way in, so let's see what you've got cooked up for me.\_

I didn't have to wait much longer to find out what was in store for us. Suddenly there was an explosion at the head of the column, causing the lead Scorpion MBT hologram to dissipate from the scene below. I wondered for just a split second what the hell it might've been, but then it came to me.

"Mines!" I shouted into the radio, used to direct the projected troops in the valley - just like in real life. "Everyone halt, now!"

The large convoy did so, albeit slowly. It was tough to instantly stop that many men and vehicles at the same time. I was starting to see that that was why I was having the importance of caution drilled into me. A squad or platoon or oftentimes, even a company could respond to an order right away; when it came to commanding upwards of two thousand troops, though, it took a moment for the motions to catch up.

Moments in which an unwitting platoon leader could march his Marines straight into a minefield much like this one. I watched via my HUD this time as the computer informed me that another two fireteams of Marines had gotten the order too late and had gone up alongside the tank.

"\_Fuck\_," I muttered. This was a bad way to start.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," the voice of one of my instructors, Colonel Luke Gragnon, came through the COM. "Never let a setback discourage you. Fix the situation. You should have seen the problem earlier but you did not, and you have many more men and women counting on you to get them through here alive. Stay sharp."

"Yes, sir." I took in a deep breath and said, "Marines, fall back fifty meters. I want snipers forward and scouting ahead for the enemy while we move."

Beside me, the major nudged my shoulder. "Ma'am? You're ordering a

retreat?"

"No. Just watch, Delaney. I'm giving us a better vantage point."

"But - "

It wasn't long before the first crack of a sniper rifle rang out in the valley. That meant the enemy was already out there and active; we just couldn't see them yet from here. I didn't wait to give out my next command.

"MBT-One, move up, center. Fire at the ground when ready."

"Colonel," Delaney said as he watched. "What - "

His voice was drowned out by the resounding detonation then, the commotion reaching us even up here thanks to the amplification from the hills on either side of the valley. It took a while for the smoke to clear, but when it did, the visual on my helmet of the minefield now that we'd discovered it was over half gone.

"MBT-One, fire again! Marines, push up right behind it! Let's go! Snipers, keep your eyes on your targets and continue to engage!"

Luckily, the attack in tandem worked just as planned. I sent the Marines rushing in behind the tank, so right after it blasted away the other half of the minefield, my men were already moving forward behind it through the debris, surprising the enemy when they emerged from the cloud. At the same time, snipers were striking down any other holographic enemy entities they could spot, reducing the size of their contingent even more. Once my Marines made it through the treacherous field and further up, firefights began to erupt across the valley floor.

"That was phase one, Marine," Colonel Gragnon said to me then. "Phase two is the real battle - and I want you and Delaney down there with them. Better move quick."

Though I was surprised at the order, I tried not to let it show in my voice. "Yes, sir. We're on it." Turning to my XO for the exercise, I said, "Delaney, we need to get down there. Let's gather up the security detail and hike over."

"Yes, ma'am."

Like the rest of the training scenario, our security detail for this was made up of holograms as well. I noticed they moved with steps that looked a little more predetermined than organic forms, but they did the trick. We moved into the valley within several minutes, joining a crazed frenzy of simulated tank fire, gunfire, and explosions. Despite all this, though, I thought I had this in the bag when we got another curveball thrown at us.

"Colonel, watch out!" Major Delaney yelled next to me. "Rockets!"

I barely even heard the words when I was suddenly blown on my ass, sending my field binoculars flying and making me land awkwardly on my

rifle, still strapped to my back. I grunted at the impact, feeling it as if it were all real - an incentive for Marines from the enlisted private all the way up to a four-star general to take these training sims seriously.

Right now I hated that.

A moment later I opened my eyes again and found myself staring into Delaney's hazel ones, not that different in color and pattern from my husband's.

"Here, ma'am," he said, offering me his hand to help me up. "We need to move. MBT-Two almost just got destroyed, and I think they've zeroed in on our position. They're going after you."

"Great," I coughed out in reply. I took his hand and was soon back on my feet, if a little achy from the hit. I winced a little and adjusted myself before taking my battle rifle in hand. "Did you see where they came from? The guys with the rockets?"

"Not precisely, but I know it was somewhere further ahead, up in the hills. I think our snipers got most of them, but obviously there's still a few left in play."

"All right. I'll send out an order to tag 'em now. Thanks for the hand."

"No problem, ma'am."

With that I set back to work, issuing the command to re-prioritize our snipers' shots to look for figures with heavy weapons. As soon as one of the sharpshooters spotted them, their silhouettes lit up in red just above the valley, and I gave the order to open fire.

In a few more minutes, the figures ceased to exist. I stood there gripping my rifle tight after the surprise attack, exchanging a look with Delaney. Then I keyed the COM and said, "Great work! Now let's keep the column moving. Don't quit keeping your eyes peeled for trouble. There's always more ahead."

Expecting to continue the scenario through to its end, I was caught off-guard when the surroundings - all the Marines, tanks, equipment, and even the enemy and the hills - melted away to show the vast, unassuming gray room the major and I were really in. Out of reflex, I glanced up to the viewing booth on the level above us, trying to somehow determine how I'd done before the colonel in charge of the training sim spoke.

"Fine job, Cooper," he finally said. "You took a bad start and managed to turn it around quite well, even with all the surprises thrown at you. I'd say you've earned your right to stay."

I only barely managed to stop the small creeping grin from spreading across my face. "So I passed, sir?"

"Yes. You passed."

\* \* \*

><p>I thanked Major Delaney for his help in the simulation and went

on to chow and then my next classes after that. The day seemed to go by faster than usual, perhaps because I was actually feeling really good about being here for the first time since I'd started my coursework. At thirty-one, I was one of the youngest students at my rank to attend here, and because of that, I'd known going in that I had a lot to prove, despite my record in the field. It was an unfortunate fact none of my peers or instructors ever seemed to let me forget.<p>

By its nature being here had come with a seed of doubt as to my qualifications, especially when I looked at everyone around me that I was competing with for the rank of O-6. Yesterday's reprimand for my test result had only made it worse. But today, I finally felt like this was something I could succeed at.

Still, at the end of the day I was tired, and still a little sore from the hit in the sim, too. I ignored it though and went over to the regimental office like always, just to check in. Only once that was done did I finally take off from base for good to go home.

After having only recently returned from multiple battles on Khan, I was still excited and awed by the fact that I got to go back to my own house at night, sleep in my own bed beside Willis, and get to spend time with my kids. Back in Redwood Falls and on Qamar Island, I'd only dreamed about luxuries like that. Now, at the close of a hard day, I had much to look forward to. It was the best part about being back on Earth.

When I stepped through the front door after unlocking it, I was greeted by a scene of almost strange calm - certainly different than the chaos I'd experienced in the simulation today, and definitely not the kind of quiet we normally had with three young children running around. I almost wanted to check and see if someone had swapped us families while I was gone.

I walked over to the living room, where Willis was sitting down on the carpet with the twins playing a game, and cocked my head to the side. "Honey? Are you sure this is our house?"

Willis turned around to look up at me and grinned. "Yup. Welcome back."

He stood then and came over to give me a deep kiss, which I returned. Behind us, I heard Liam and Olivia make grossed out noises.

"All right, all right," I said after my husband and I had pulled apart. "I know you guys want to come give me a hug, so come'ere."

I stooped a bit and wrapped my arms around both twins, our little presents after the War was over. Willis and I had wanted a second child for a while at that point, and had temporarily gotten our wish - albeit unexpectedly - after circumstances had brought us together to fight the Flood in Austria. I was only three months into my pregnancy when I lost the baby, though, and that was a harsh blow that took us both a long time to heal from. For me, it was still something I carried with me every day, just beneath the surface. But after the big battles in Africa, after humanity had finally won the war, we went back to our base in Denmark and had decided to try again. Four months later I'd found out we were expecting again - this time, with two. My family meant everything to me, and I vowed to

never let anything happen to any of my kids again.

Liam and Olivia both hugged me back hard, then went and settled beside their dad once more to continue their game. Since I had a lot of work to catch up on, I decided to leave them to it and went to look for our oldest son before I sat down to study.

I found Gabriel sitting at the table in the kitchen, working on a project of his own. He had his back to me and it seemed he hadn't heard the door chime when I'd entered, so I surprised him by taking hold of his ears from behind and giving him a kiss on the top of his short, golden brown hair - just like Willis's. He immediately turned around and flashed me a big smile.

"Hi, Mom. You're home!"

"Hi, sweetheart. I am now. What're you working on?"

"Math homework. Mr. Lee gave us a lot today."

I looked over his shoulder at the page he was writing on, glad to see it was mostly done. "Why the blanks at the beginning?"

My oldest son frowned. "I couldn't figure it out. It's too hard."

"Want some help?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, what?"

"I mean, yes, please."

"Okay. Just give me a minute. I'm going to change and get some food first, then I'll come do homework with you. Keep working on the rest in the meantime." I turned to go, then whipped back around and pulled my cover off and placed it on his head. "Oh, I almost forgot. You get to be the colonel in charge while I'm gone, okay?"

He smiled again from under the brim and pushed the camouflage hat up to look at me with his green eyes - the ones he'd gotten from me.

"Okay, Mommy."

"Good. I'll be right back."

\* \* \*

><p>After changing out of my uniform and into a light gray UNSC-MC T-shirt and a pair of navy blue sweats, I walked back over to the kitchen to grab some leftover food from the fridge for dinner, then took my plate and my datapad to the table and sat down beside my son. I wolfed down the cold meal while reading through more of the textbook we used in class, still thinking the unheated food tasted better than hot MREs or dull energy bars any day. That was another thing I'd missed in the field. Edible food, and the comfort of a warm bed and a hot shower.<p>

After a moment I noticed Gabriel peering over at what I was reading. He put his fist under his chin and threw me a questioning look.

"You have homework, too, Mom?"

"Yep. Sadly. That's the nature of the beast when you go back to school. Even mine."

"Why did you go back?"

I couldn't help but chuckle at his expression, like he thought anyone who would voluntarily return was demented. I pulled him closer and ruffled his hair. I'd really missed him. "I have to, baby. It's the only way to get to the next rank. Otherwise I'd stay the one I am forever."

"But you never had to go to school before."

"No, I didn't, but things are different now. I'm getting closer and closer to the top, so there's a lot more work involved." Not that the other ranks had been easy to get - far from it - but they hadn't required any academic component beyond my initial graduation from the Naval Academy eleven years ago. It was crazy to think it'd already been that long since I'd last been in school.

"Mom?"

"Yeah, honey?"

Gabriel's demeanor changed abruptly as his face went serious. "Are you and Dad going to leave again?"

For a minute I didn't know how to respond. I couldn't tell him no; the truth was, I didn't know if or when we'd be getting sent off on our next mission. What I did know was that for the moment, my own orders were simply to attend the College. And seeing as my regiment had just come back from a tour - though brief - it was likely we wouldn't be called upon to leave for a while.

I released a sigh. "Someday we might have to, Gabe. It's part of the job. But for now, while I'm in school, probably not. I'm supposed to be at the College for close to a year, so that means I'll be home with you guys for a long time."

My son seemed to take that news in with cautious contentment, until he thought of his next inquiry. "What about Dad? He said he can't fly anymore."

"I don't know, son. To be honest, I'm not too sure about your dad. We'll just have to see."

Willis had been the victim of a horrific friendly-fire crash in his Pelican while we'd been fighting the Prometheans and Storm on the island on Khan. For a long time I thought he was going to die, and afterward the recovery process had taken a while. When he'd finally emerged from a coma and started to heal up, things still weren't quite right. The doctors there had said he'd likely never pilot an aircraft again, news that had hit my husband very hard. We'd both hoped that with more time and rehabilitation that the situation might change, but so far, it hadn't. The doctors he'd visited on base here once we'd gotten back had told him the same thing. For now he busied himself at home with the kids, or at his physical therapy

appointments, or even doing deskwork on base a few hours a day while Gabe and the twins were in school. But I knew at some point a decision had to be made, and I feared that that was coming up real soon.

To stave off more questions and reassure our son of our presence, I pulled Gabe in for a hug and said, "Whatever happens, you know that we love you, and your brother and your sister, more than anything else in the world. And we're slated to be here for a while. But if ever that changes, try not to be too sad, and remember to be strong for Liam and Liv, like you were this last time we left. We'll always do everything we can to get back to the three of you. I promise."

## 6. Chapter 5: Complications

Author's Note: Sorry about the short chapter this time. I wanted it to be longer but it didn't seem to fit the rest of what I wanted to write, and I thought it worked better as a standalone. So, without further ado, the saga continues...

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Five:<span> Complications\*\*

\*\*\*\*0345 Hours, June 18, 2558. Cooper-Hawk Residence, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Silent Scars," Planet Earth. Prologue to the War of Tomorrow\*\*\*\*

Five nights later I had a familiar memory haunt my dreams. I hadn't revisited it in a long time, thanks to the meds I took for the nightmares; I hadn't even dreamt about it when I'd had to go without for several weeks after my supply had gotten all used up on Khan. But I remembered it now, and it was just as chilling and gut-wrenching as it had been the day I'd seen it.

The setting this time was six years ago on Sigma Octanus IV, during the Covenant invasion. In the dream I suddenly found myself walking around an eerily quiet and empty plaza with a fountain in the center, broken and blackened and spraying water sporadically - just like it had in real life after the Covies had launched their surprise attack. Unlike that day, however, in this dream, I was all alone. There was no sign of my Marines of first platoon, and no indication that the rest of Bravo Company was on its way behind me. I was it.

The sun wasn't quite over the horizon yet, so it was dark and the sky still had a purplish haze to it. I gripped my shotgun tighter in my hands, glancing down at my already-scuffed boots and the single silver bar insignia of a first lieutenant on my uniform, and slowly pressed forward.

Gradually the scene began to populate with even more awful forms. As I approached the once-empty city square, I could now see the rows upon rows of mangled civilian bodies that littered the streets - victims of the Covenant air support runs. We hadn't gotten there in time to save them. No one could've known that the aliens were coming here.

"Fat chance of saving those guys," a voice behind me suddenly



said.

I nearly jumped in my skin and whipped around, doing a double-take. It was Oliver Hayden, wearing his major's insignia and dressed in the same fatigues he'd had on the day he'd died in the forest fight against the Storm on Khan. His presence was completely at odds with the rest of the dream; I hadn't even known him back then.

Hayden, however, went on unperturbed, pointing a finger at one of the dead. "See that guy? Plasma shot right through the gut? Totally gone."

"I know," I replied softly. "We were too late."

"Too late for me, too. And for Lewis." He cocked an eyebrow at me. "I'm not sure if you've noticed, but a lot of people have died on your watch."

Tears stung at my eyes then, but I held them in check. "I can still list all of them. Private Beesner, Captain Kingston, Lieutenant Graham, Captain Schaeffer, Corporal Garian, Lieutenant Samson, Sergeant Dandh, Private Roys. Hell, even that damn Elite 'Kuatee. Then there's Dean, and you, and my baby. My older sister and my parents. And now Staff Sergeant Porter and all those Marines I sent to die on the island." I swallowed hard. "So many fucking lives, Oliver. Why? Why am I a magnet for this shit?"

My late best friend shrugged. "I don't know. Sometimes that's just the hand you're dealt. And you knew going into this that joining the Marines wasn't going to be easy. It always comes with hardships, Natalie. You'll always see death."

I frowned as I stared vacantly out at the slaughter around me. "But this much? How many more do I have to bear losing?"

"Wish I knew, Cooper." He gave me a small smirk. "Unfortunately I can't tell the future. I'm just dead."

"Yeah, but - "

When I turned to face him again, I saw that Hayden had vanished. There was no sign at all that he'd ever been there. Just like that, I was on my own once more. And there was still a long, lonely stretch of blown-out street I had to go through.

I steadied myself and held my weapon out, ready to fire at whatever I might encounter out here in the dream. But there weren't any physically threatening foes that I could see. Just what was already in my head.

The endless stretch of corpses continued - like a replay of all the people I'd known we'd failed that day. But in real life, I remembered there still being some alive, walking around in a daze at the carnage. Here, there weren't any. I almost wanted to start running, as if it would help me emerge from this nightmare, but then I came to an abrupt halt.

My breath caught in my throat when I saw it, and I could feel my chest tighten to an uncomfortable degree. Suddenly my stomach turned and I retched, throwing up in the street unlike what had happened in

the real city. There, I'd dropped to my knees, particularly struck by it because of my own young son at home. Here, for some reason, it felt even worse.

It was the little brown-haired boy from the bus stop in Cote D'Azur, lying with his blue eyes wide open even in death, his short hair matted with blood and a hole going straight through his chest. He looked to be about four or five years old - and the fearful look on his face was something I'd never forget.

"No," I whispered. "No, no, no, no. Please, not my son."

As soon as I said it, I wondered why I'd blurted it out. This kid looked nothing like either of mine. The image was related and struck a chord deep inside me, but he wasn't -

"Liam!"

Somehow and inexplicably, the boy's hair had gone from a dark brown to a medium hue, and his eyes had morphed from blue to hazel, like his dad's. Now it really was my son lying there. My youngest.

I let out a scream.

\* \* \*

><p>I woke up so abruptly and forcefully that I felt like I couldn't breathe for a second, even though air was making its way into my lungs at a rapid pace. It took me the better part of two minutes to begin to calm down and realize where I was. Home. In a bed. Next to Willis...who for once hadn't woken up to my nightmare panic. I slowly took in a deep breath and let it out, trying to tell myself that everything was fine.<p>

Except it wasn't. I'd just dreamed of my child's death. Fully awake now, I got up out of bed and carefully pulled on some sweats over my underwear, already wearing my pajama top, and tiptoed out of the room.

The darkness of the house in the middle of the night did little to assuage my fears from the dream. It all still felt pretty threatening to me, and for a moment I wished I had my pistol on me. We didn't keep any firearms in the house though, for obvious reasons, and so I was left feeling more vulnerable and afraid than I normally was. A part of me knew it was irrational, but after a nightmare like that, I couldn't seem to help it.

I didn't breathe a real sigh of relief until I'd made my way to the twins' bedroom and opened the door a crack, just enough to see their small forms lying peacefully in their beds. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, and both were sleeping soundly. Just for my own peace of mind, I walked down the hall a bit and checked in on Gabe next. Nothing wrong there, either.

Outside his room, I pressed my back to the wall and shut my eyes tight, slowly sliding down the wall until I was sitting on the ground with my knees up to my chest. I felt my heart clench and the tears came next, silent ones that I couldn't really rationalize away. I didn't know if I was crying because of the dream itself, or because of its reminders of the people I'd lost, or because I was genuinely

relieved after the intensity of the nightmare that my kids were okay. It could've been for any of those reasons, or even for all three.

One thing was for sure though. I knew now that the medicine I was taking for the nightmares wasn't helping to block them out anymore.

## 7. Chapter 6: Trying to Cope

### \*\*Chapter Six: Trying to Cope\*\*

"Natalie, wake up."

I was slow to register that the voice that roused me to semi-conscious belonged to Willis. I felt him trying to nudge me awake by prodding my shoulder, with minimal success. When I finally opened my eyes, I found myself blinking against one of the cushions on the sofa in the living room. The surroundings were still dark and my head hurt. Groggily I put a hand up to my eyes to rub them, wondering how I'd gotten where I was.

"Will?"

His face filled my field of vision. He was crouched beside my head, looking only marginally more alert than I was. "Yeah. I woke up a little while ago and you weren't there, so I came to see where you'd gone. What are you doing out here?"

"That's...a good question. What time is it?"

"Just after oh-five-thirty." My husband released a sigh. "It wouldn't have anything to do with this, would it?"

I squinted in the dark and saw him pick up two objects from the coffee table behind him. One was an empty tumbler, recently used, and the other was a bottle of liquor; I couldn't tell what in the lack of light. I pressed a hand to my temple and groaned.

"Shit. I'm sorry." I must've fallen asleep without putting the stuff away. I was suddenly grateful that Willis had come to wake me up. The last thing I wanted was for my kids to see it. "I meant to put it back."

Willis looked at me for a moment longer before standing and bringing the glass over to the sink and placing the bottle back in one of the high cabinets in the kitchen. Then he ambled back to where I was lying on the couch, one arm over my face. I felt like pure crap.

"How much did you drink, Coop?"

"I don't know. Not a lot. Maybe a glass or two with a few fingers in it. I'm fine."

He took that information in without any sign of acknowledgment. For a minute he just stood above me with his arms folded across his chest, looking pensive, then finally dropped his hands to his sides and took a seat on the floor next to the couch. He ran a hand over his face

and sighed again.

"Will, I said I'm sorry," I offered, putting my own arm behind my head now to look at him. "It won't happen again."

"All right. I'll hold you to that."

"I know. And you should. Things just...got a bit out of hand."

"What happened?"

I swallowed, finally remembering what all this was about now that I was more awake. "I had a nightmare," I said quietly. "They've started to come back."

His golden brown eyebrows went up. "How? I thought you were taking your meds again."

"I am. That's the part that worries me."

Neither of us said anything for a moment. I waited for that to sink in while Willis tried to process. Then I felt him reach over and take hold of my other hand, draped over my stomach.

"Fuck, Cooper."

"Yeah. I know."

"What did you dream about?"

I'd known the question was coming, but what I'd seen in the dream was so awful I didn't want to retell it. Yet I forced myself to, for his sake. "I was back on Sigma Octanus Four during the Covenant invasion. Hayden was there, too, briefly. Everyone else was gone. Doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but then again dreams rarely do." This time I was the one to sigh. "I dreamed about the dead little boy I'd found there near the fountain in the square. It felt like he was staring right at me with his dead eyes, and I..." I took a deep breath. "I looked away and when I turned back, it was Liam."

I felt the tears start to form again as soon as Willis took me in his arms. It was a little awkward because of the angle, but no less comforting to me. Finally I wasn't all alone out here, in the dark with nothing but my thoughts and memories running rampant.

"Christ, Natalie," he said softly. "I'm sorry you had to see that. I couldn't even - "

"I can't, either."

I heard him swallow. "I know how it felt when we lost the baby, and I never want to feel that again." He pulled back a bit to look me in the eyes. "But nothing's going to happen, okay? Remember back on Khan, when you had that nightmare about your brother? He came out just fine."

I snorted. "Well, he got trapped under a bunch of rubble and had more than a few broken bones when we pulled him out, but yeah."

"What I meant is, he didn't die. You found him in time, and he

survived," my husband added. "So don't take too much stock in a dream. I know it can freak you out when you first wake up from it, but remember that it's not reality. It's just your subconscious trying to deal with everything you've gone through."

"Yeah. And we've been through a lot."

"We have, but I wouldn't trade you for the world."

Willis surprised me a little then by leaning down to kiss me. The first one was soft and tender, leaving me wanting more. I kissed him back harder, grateful for his calming presence, and hoped for something to develop. But after our lips touched a third time, he drew back again.

"What is it?" I asked him. "What's wrong?"

He suddenly grinned at me. "Listen."

In the quiet I was finally able to hear what he had - the soft patter of little feet on the carpeted floor of the hallway. A second later Liam emerged at the door to the living room and kitchen area, looking drowsy.

"Mommy? Daddy?"

"Hey, buddy," Willis said, waving his hand. "Come on over. What're you doing up so early?"

"I dunno. I just woke up."

Our youngest son shuffled forward then and went into his father's waiting arms. Little Liam clung to Willis's plain white T-shirt in the dark as he looked me over with a slight frown on his face.

"Mommy, are you sick?"

I reached out to run my hand through his short hair to reassure him. "No, baby. I'm okay. I just had a little trouble sleeping."

"Why?"

I exchanged a glance with my husband, hoping he'd supply a suitable answer.

"Your mom gets bad dreams sometimes that keep her awake," Willis replied. "Like you've had a couple times before."

"Oh, yeah. I get those sometimes, too. They're scary."

"Yup. So when something scares you that bad, it can be hard to go back to sleep right away." Willis glanced at me as he continued. "But like I told your mom earlier, you have to remember that they're just dreams."

Liam let go of his dad then and threw his arms around my neck instead, resting his small head on my chest. "Don't worry, Mommy. I'll protect you."

I smiled to myself as I put my hand on his back and ran it up and down. "I know you would, son. I love you."

"Love you, too."

Sadly I'd found that that wasn't enough to keep the nightmares at bay. Soon, I'd have to figure out what else I could do about them now that they'd returned.

\* \* \*

><p>The rest of the morning I was grateful for all I had to occupy myself with so I wouldn't have to think about my predicament - or the disturbing contents of my nightmare. Gabriel and the twins were out of school for the summer now, so there wasn't as crazy of a rush with them in the morning, but I still had my usual things to get in order before I started my classes.<p>

My morning run was the worst of it; the last thing I wanted was more time to myself to think, although the strenuous activity did me good. I felt a little more levelheaded by the time I'd showered, changed, and sat down for my first course of the day - an instruction on liaising with the local population. That made me snort. I'd already learned more than enough about that from the sometimes cooperative - but mostly homicidal - Mayor Javier Laraza on Khan.

Just when I felt like the day couldn't drag enough, we were sent to the firing range in the afternoon instead of gym hour. There I was once again paired up with Major Justin Delaney, who acted as my spotter while I shot off rounds from an M395 DMR, lying prone in the dirt.

"Nice shot, Colonel," he said after I hit my fifth consecutive burst on target. "I wish my hand was that steady. I've always had a little trouble with the burst-fire mode. I prefer single shots."

"Yeah? I've found a quick burst keeps you this side of dead more often than not in a firefight," I responded, not taking my eyes off the objective. "Can't say I'd be here to tell you the same thing about a single shot. Sometimes there just isn't any time for perfect alignment, so you've got to go with throwing as much at the enemy at once as you can and hope something sticks."

"Roger that, ma'am."

I squeezed the trigger again, placing three more bullet holes on top of the others I'd been firing into the target's head since the start. To say I had a lot of tension to release today was an understatement. "To be honest, I'm surprised I'm hitting anything at all. I got about four hours of sleep last night. Not much more than what we get in the field."

"Kids keep you up?"

Frowning, I shifted my angle a bit before pulling the trigger. "No. How do you know I have kids?"

"I read your file, Colonel. The public parts, anyway. I thought we could commiserate."

I chuckled, feeling the steel of the gun against my cheek just beneath my ballistic glasses. "Lucky for me I've already gotten past the hourly feeding, diaper-changing, and terrible twos phases with all my kids. Sounds like you've got a newborn in the house."

"We've got two of them, actually, ma'am. My wife and I were blessed with twin girls about a month and a half ago," the curly-haired major answered. "Our first ones. It's been pretty amazing so far, but also...intense. And very exhausting."

"No kidding. New twins and you're here at the War College? You treading water yet, Major?"

Delaney laughed. "A little. I know you and your husband had a set of twins a few years back too, so I was hoping you could give me some advice."

"My advice?" I asked him, firing off a final round on target before picking myself up from the ground and ejecting the rest of the magazine from the rifle. I looked Delaney in the eyes and said, "Enjoy it while you can, Major. Every moment of it. They grow up too fast and in this business, you'll be gone half the time anyway. You'll cherish each minute you got to spend together when you're gone from home, and I guarantee that by the end, you'll be aching to come back to them."

## 8. Chapter 7: Tough Standards

**\*\*Chapter Seven: Tough Standards\*\***

**\*\*2014 Hours, June 20, 2558. Pensacola War College Training Grounds, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Games," Planet Earth. Prologue to the War of Tomorrow\*\***

Crouching in the dark in the pouring rain, battle rifle in hand and held at the ready, was just as miserable as I remembered it being. The occasional thunder strikes that lit up the night sky every so often certainly didn't help matters any. I was cold and soaked and shivering, weighed down by my wet fatigues and armor, but a part of it felt like home.

"Enemy spotted, Colonel," Major Delaney said from a few feet away, also keeping low amongst the foliage. "I've picked up their heat signatures. Coming up on our right flank just ahead."

I keyed my COM with slick fingers and whispered low, "Acknowledged. Stay put for now. We'll see if they take the bait."

"Roger that."

We waited patiently for the next few minutes to catch the holographic enemy in our trap. Before they'd been deployed onto the field, my instructors had given me ten minutes to configure a line of defense for my men. What I'd opted for was the darkness of the night and thickness of the vegetation to keep us hidden, while the remainder of the regiment, also made up of holographic forms, encircled the enemy as they made their way deeper into our lines. We were effectively boxing them in without them knowing it, and soon, they'd discover

their mistake.

"Package on the way, ma'am," Delaney murmured over the COM. "Should be hitting the first snare in three, two, one..."

A sudden explosion burst through the trees, sending sparks of light and fragments of dirt and plant parts into the sky. I watched through my helmet's HUD as four holograms - patterned to look like Storm troops - vanished from sight.

"That's four," I replied. "Move up on the left and we'll take the rest while they're dazed."

"On it."

Shock and awe worked best in situations like these where the terrain was your home turf, and the enemy had no viable line of sight to go by other than electronics. Still trying to keep knowledge of our presence to a minimum, Major Delaney and I approached what was left of the patrol from opposite sides, engaging fast and hard. Coming up on the right, I quickly slung my rifle behind my back and took my combat knife in hand, then sunk it deep into the posterior of the first Grunt I found - which none-too-intelligently had its back to me. It tried to give out a little squeal but I held it back, driving the blade deeper and harder into flesh that wasn't really there. After that, just to make certain, I slit a hole in its methane tank, ensuring the small alien's demise. Only a couple of seconds later its body dropped to the ground, disappearing into millions of pixels.

"Next two. Go."

We tackled the remaining pair of aliens together - one a Jackal, one an Elite. Still disoriented and injured from the blast, the Jackal went down fast with three point-blank shots from Delaney's silenced pistol. Meanwhile, I threw caution to the wind for once, tired of waiting around for something to happen, and jumped onto the Elite's back from among the greenery.

The first swing of my knife connected, spurting imaginary purple blood from a neck wound that only seemed to be real. The Elite cried out in pain and rage, then quickly tried to throw me off while I attempted to climb up higher on its back. The thing was slender but tall as hell, and I knew from personal experience that if I didn't end his life pretty fast, he'd end mine instead. If he was able to get a solid grip on me I was toast; all it took was one good squeeze of my throat or ribs and I was a goner.

"Delaney! I could use some help!" I yelled out over the radio.

Struggling against the Elite's might, I wrapped my free hand around its shoulder, but the rain made it hard to hold onto. I felt myself start to slip as I tried to go for another stab, and the holographic form took notice. He gave a big shake of his back and roared, almost throwing me off, but I tightened my grip and held on.

What finally did it was the Elite backhanding me from behind. After that I lost it and plummeted toward the grass.



I hit the dirt with a harsh groan and laid there for a moment, seeing stars. Even catching just a partial amount of the force behind the slap had my ears ringing and made my jaw feel like it'd been fractured. Maybe in real life it would have been. Either way, it hurt like crazy.

"Colonel!" I heard the major shout.

I wanted to tell him I was fine, but I couldn't find the words just yet. I'd had the wind knocked out of me, too. With effort, I rolled over onto my stomach, imploring my lungs to open back up, but they wouldn't. All I felt was the impact of the rain on my already-drenched body and my muscles screaming in pain from the fall and the hit. But no breath.

Finally, when I was reaching the point that my vision was going dark around the edges, the oxygen came back. I took in a greedy lungful, coughed out the irritation, and then pushed myself back onto my feet. I shoved my combat knife into its sheath above my left boot, then pulled out my battle rifle from behind my back and let it rip.

Between myself and Delaney, the wounded Elite didn't stand a chance. We'd both fought a number of them before and knew their weak points well, and were aware of exactly what it would take to bring one down when we were so outnumbered. After a final burst from my BR85HB SR to the head the alien fell, departing the imaginary battlefield for good. And leaving nothing but the rain for now.

The major and I stood there a moment, each catching our breath. For me, I was trying to overcome the overwhelming pain I felt in my face, and the aftermath of the hit that was still making me a little dizzy. I wanted to puke.

"That was a close one, ma'am," Delaney said to me after a minute.

I almost nodded out of reflex, but thought better of it. "Yeah. But what's life without a little risk? We got 'im."

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," came Colonel Gragnon's voice over the COM then. "What is your status? Your vitals are showing distress."

"All green, sir," I responded roughly. "Just had a run-in that got a bit more involved than I'd planned."

"Be mindful of that, Cooper. In the field the enemy will stop at nothing - and the injuries you fight with will be real."

"Yes, sir. I think my collection of Purple Hearts makes me an authority on that."

I unconsciously put a hand to my torso armor, just above my heart. While deployed on Khan I'd had to endure a number of attempts on my life by the local rebels, and one had finally damn near done me in. I'd gone into cardiac arrest and was technically dead for five minutes after getting shot twice by a hired Jackal sniper before I finally came back around and woke up three days later in a hospital bed. One of the armor-piercing bullets had gone through my left shoulder, while the other had gone straight into my back and out my

chest. I'd been lucky my heart was only grazed and not hit directly or I would've definitely died - for good - that day at Outpost Columbia.

"Maybe so, but here you will discover what all your experience is really worth," the colonel continued. "And that is true for all of our students who are vying for the next pay grade. Proceed."

"Yes, sir."

I took in a deep breath then to steady my heart rate and think. What Major Delaney and I had just taken out was only the forward scouting patrol. Soon, we'd have the whole enemy force on our asses if we didn't move now and bring in the big guns.

Pulling my boots out of the wet muck I'd fallen into only minutes earlier, I keyed the COM again and this time addressed the troops under my care. "Marines, start tightening up the flanks. The enemy has infiltrated our lines as planned, so now we close in and crush them. Press the target and let's move."

In the meantime, now that the head column was dealt with, Delaney and I moved more cautiously through the foliage to retreat from the direct line of fire and move back into friendly territory before the main assault. In order to keep issuing commands, we both needed to stay alive. And I knew that what we'd just done was more of a risk than I should've allowed us to take at our rank.

But sometimes, when you wanted a job done right, I'd found it was best to play a direct hand yourself.

\* \* \*

><p>When I finally got home that evening, it was well past 2100 hours. By the time the war game was over, and my performance and Delaney's evaluated, it'd already been late. Factor in the shower and change of clothes I'd had to do afterward - since the setting for the game this time had been real and outdoors, even if the enemy and our allies hadn't been - and I came home an exhausted mess late at night. I didn't even bother stopping by my regimental office afterward, something I usually did religiously.<p>

Much to my dismay the kids were already asleep and in bed, so I didn't even get to see them, other than to check in on them in their rooms when I first walked in. After that I made my way back into the living room and practically collapsed onto the couch, pulling off my wet boots from the rainstorm that continued to rage outside, then shrugged out of my uniform jacket and took off my cover. I sat for another minute with my head resting against the back of the sofa and my eyes closed until I felt Willis sink down beside me. Without a word he leaned over and kissed me, and I kissed him back.

"Rough day?" he asked.

"Hardest one yet, I think," I answered tiredly. "I almost got my jaw broken and knocked out, and the elements didn't help much. The war game was held outside this time. Probably out of spite."

My husband chuckled. "I kind of doubt that, Coop. They're just testing you. Part of that is always pushing your limits."

"I know. I just wish at some point I wouldn't have to keep proving to everyone that I know what I can do."

"Well, you've got ten months to show your stuff, honey. After that, in less than a year, if all goes well you'll make full colonel. And that'll be worth all of it."

I couldn't help the small smile that came to my face, tired as I was. "Yeah. It will." My stomach grumbled loudly then, and I laid my hand over it. "But first, I really need some chow."

Willis nodded and stood. "There's leftovers from dinner in the fridge. I can heat it up for you."

"Okay. Thanks."

I winced as I stood once more and walked over to the counter in the kitchen, where I sat on a stool and waited for the food to cook. It smelled delicious and made my mouth water. I hadn't eaten anything since lunchtime, nearly ten hours ago now. And you couldn't complain about a hot meal that wasn't in the shape of a bar or out of a premixed box.

When the plate of chicken, rice, and broccoli was placed in front of me, I didn't even bother trying to inhale it. In short order everything Willis had warmed up for me was gone. I washed it down with a large glass of water, then got up to grab myself a hunk of bread and some cheese before returning to my seat.

Willis watched me with a smirk on his face. "Damn, Coop. I haven't seen you eat that much since we were in training at the Academy."

"Hey, I was starving," I said around a mouthful of bread. "We burn through a lot of fuel these days. Running and classes in the morning, exercises and games in the afternoon and sometimes at night...makes a girl hungry."

A little while later I was finally stuffed. I put the dishes in the sink and sat back down on the stool next to Willis, then rested my head against his shoulder as my eyelids drooped. It'd been a long day and now that I'd eaten, all I wanted to do was sleep for twelve hours - even though I knew I couldn't. The next day I'd be back at it by 0630 again, just like always.

## 9. Chapter 8: Mixed Signals

Author's Note: So I'm once again playing fast and loose with canon a bit to fit my story, while at the same time trying my best to stay as close to it as possible. :P My characters will continue to have the events of Halo 4 and the Spartan Ops series shape their world, at least to a certain extent, and now I'm working under the premise that forces have remained embattled on Requiem all this time - as they were while my peeps were on Khan - but no one has made a move for Earth yet.

We'll see pretty soon where this leaves Cooper and company.

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter<span> Eight: Mixed Signals\*\*

The fact that I woke up the next morning without suffering from the endless loop of memories in my head during the night was a minor miracle. Willis waking up before the alarm, around the same time I did, was pretty nice as well. I soon found, however, that the best was yet to come when my husband got up out of bed and went to lock the bedroom door - just in case - and returned to my side with a new purpose. Shortly after that, we were well on our way to blissful forgetfulness of all our problems while the kids were still asleep.

Afterward we lay side-by-side, both still breathing heavy and sweaty from the exertion, but feeling a lot more relaxed, despite the promise of another long day ahead. The sheets were in an upheaval and mostly off the bed, while the clothes we'd worn to sleep littered the floor - but that was fine by me.

A moment later Willis moved in closer, wrapping his arm around my side and leaning his head down to kiss my neck. "How was that?" he whispered in my ear.

I heard the mischievous grin in his voice and found myself smirking, too. "Amazing," I replied, turning my head to take his face in my hands and give him a deep kiss. "Can't think of a better way to start the day."

"Good," he said, kissing me back. "You were amazing, too."

We lounged in bed for several more minutes, kissing leisurely as if there were nothing else in the outside world to attend to. Soon, though, I found myself checking the clock, and we finally had to break apart before it got too late.

"Will," I tried to say as his lips met mine again. "We need to get up. Gabe and the twins'll be awake soon, and I need to shower and get ready."

"I know. It's just nice to pretend we're not on a full schedule sometimes." He rolled over and off the bed, then leaned down to pick up his boxers from the ground before turning back to me with a grin. "But look on the bright side, Coop. Now you don't have to feel bad that you missed your morning run. You still got a good workout."

I snorted before grabbing my own shirt from the floor and smacked him playfully with it. "Now you're going to have me thinking about this all day and I won't be able to concentrate. If I fail my classes, I'm blaming you."

Willis just continued to grin. "That's the best kind of distraction to have."

I finally got up myself then and searched around for my underclothes and some shorts I could put on before going down the hall to take a shower. "What's on tap for you today? Besides taking the kids to camp."

To keep the kids from going stir crazy now that they were out of

school, Gabriel had opted to attend a day-long summer soccer camp with a few of his friends from class, while Liam and Olivia were enrolled in something similar with their preschool peers, for half the day. It took some shuttling but it gave Willis some free hours to work in the mornings when he needed to be on base to attend to squadron matters or do physical therapy, and it gave our sons and daughter some fun activities to do out of the house.

Willis let out a sigh as he finished dressing. "Back in the office again this morning. Major Collins said she had some paperwork for me to go through for the air wing. After that I've got a PT meeting right before I need to go get Liam and Liv. I'm supposed to be getting my progress report today."

I stopped and walked over to him. "Are you nervous?"

"Of course I am. My career's on the line with this one, Cooper. If I haven't made anymore progress by now..." He shrugged sadly. "I don't know if I can stay a pilot."

I reached up to stroke his cheek. I knew what that meant to him. "I'm sure it'll be fine, honey. I hope it's good news."

"Yeah. Me, too."

"Gabe was asking about you the other day, too," I said, momentarily snaking my arms around his waist and resting my head against his chest, as much to comfort him as me. "We're all pulling for you, Will."

\* \* \*

><p>All of the pleasantness of this morning had been drained away by a day full of intense courses and an afternoon laden with weapons training and strategy puzzles. We weren't given a full field exercise or war game to perform, but instead were divided up into small groups and each had to take a turn being the leader for a scenario given to us by our instructors, which our peers then evaluated us on. Once again I received points for originality and instincts, but lesser marks on taking a well-balanced approach. I was still looked at by many as a sort of black sheep around here, a young and overly aggressive LTC who hadn't quite grasped the rigors and complexities of the larger, tougher jobs yet. But after leading my regiment on Khan, and making it through my first three weeks of schooling at the War College now, I knew I could see it through. Even if I was a little unorthodox.<p>

For once we were thankfully released early, in part to make up for staying so much later the night before, and with that I was given ample time to return to regiment headquarters to take care of some things for the 52nd. I was planning on spending at least a couple of hours at the office before going home to spend time with my kids - something I'd also missed out on yesterday - when I walked in and saw my XO and the spook talking.

I looked at them both, finding it interesting that they'd chosen to speak to each other in the middle of the hallway. "Am I interrupting something?"

Both quickly came to attention in front of me and saluted. "No,

ma'am," they said in unison.

A small smile tugged at my lips as I saluted back. "At ease. So is this personal or business?"

The Marine and the Naval officer exchanged a quick glance.

"Business, Colonel," Major Brewer answered. "Lieutenant Lloyd was just telling me about a message he received from HighCom earlier today."

"Yeah? What'd it say?"

Lloyd glanced around, giving me the impression that he may have mentioned something about a message in passing, but definitely hadn't discussed the details with my XO yet...indicating that most of their conversation just now had been personal. "I'd like us to take this into your office, ma'am, if you would. I've only just been granted clearance to include Major Brewer on this, and it's something you need to know as well. But for everyone else, it's still highly classified."

I gestured up ahead with my arm. "All right. Lead the way, Lieutenant."

Once the pair had filed in, I stepped inside myself and shut the door behind us.

"Have a seat," I said, motioning to the two chairs in front of my desk while I moved to the single one on the other side. "Both of you."

They did as they were told. As soon as they'd situated themselves, I folded my arms across my chest and leaned back.

"Go ahead, Cal. Let's hear it."

The ONI operative cleared his throat. "Yes, ma'am. Well, like the major said, I got a message from Sydney this morning. And they wanted me to relay the info to the two of you. It's about Requiem."

I nodded without a word, while I could tell my second-in-command was drawing a blank. She looked over at Lloyd with a puzzled expression.

"Requiem? Is that a planet?"

"Sort of, ma'am," he answered. "It's...a long story. I was only cleared to brief Lieutenant Colonel Cooper on it towards the end of our mission on Khan. But now that it's become a bigger threat, and there's fears that the conflict might spread, the brass has decided to tell both of you. You'll find the details in the data packet I sent you."

Interest piqued, I sat up a little straighter now. "Why the two of us, Lieutenant? Why now?"

Lloyd paused to take in a breath. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Colonel, especially given the fact that we've all just arrived

back home safely to our families. But it looks like High Command is considering recruiting the 52nd Regiment for the fight on Requiem. If they approve the sending of additional troops as reinforcements or even replacements over there, we're their first pick."

"Shit."

I hadn't meant to say it out loud. It was unprofessional of me to voice my opinion on a potential mission in front of subordinates - more so since it was negative. But this was Cal and Brewer. I figured a small lapse was okay with them. Hell, I'd gone drinking with the spook on more than one occasion, and through his ONI credentials he had access to more personal information of mine than my own mother had when she was alive. I mentally shrugged it off.

"Is there a special reason we hit the crap jackpot?" Major Brewer asked, echoing my sentiment.

"Yes, ma'am. Our mission to Khan." Caleb looked to me now. "The brass were impressed with how you handled things groundside, Colonel. They're equally interested in bringing a commander in who actually has experience fighting the Prometheans - and not only that, but fighting them simultaneously with the Storm."

I snorted. "Well, I guess it can't be any worse than Redwood Falls and Qamar. At least we won't have to worry about a third enemy popping us in the back while we're busy dealing with the robots and aliens. This might just be a fair fight this time around."

"Maybe. Both factions have a strong presence there. Much larger numbers than what we encountered in the Outer Colonies."

"Right. And just out of curiosity, how would we get there, if we were to get the call? I thought Requiem was some kind of shield world. I'm assuming it doesn't have a basic front door like normal planets do, and we blew up the portal to it we found on Khan."

The spook nodded. "That's true, ma'am. But we know for a fact that's not the only artifact out there like that. Right now we're looking into the possibility of finding another portal that can lead us directly into Requiem. It would make the trip a whole lot faster." He scratched at his smooth jaw. "Besides, traveling all the way out to Khan to get us to the place would have been an enormous waste of time and resources. It would've taken too long."

"Wait," Brewer said, injecting herself back into the conversation by holding up a hand. "I understand Colonel Cooper has received a brief on this already. I haven't. What the hell is a 'shield world'? And portals? Like the ones we found on Khan? What were they connected to?"

This time I was the one to exchange a glance with Cal. "Lloyd, I think you've got your work cut out for you. Give Brewer the rundown and then be sure to keep me in the loop about this. If we're supposed to be moving out soon, I'd like to know so I can prepare the troops. And myself." And my family, who just got me back, I thought solemnly. I'd promised my oldest son I was here to stay, at least for a good long while. I'd hate it if I had to go back on that. And having to leave my three kids again so soon...it was more than I could bear to think about right now.

Lieutenant Lloyd nodded. "Of course, ma'am. You'll be the first to know."

"Great. So what are they planning to do about my spot at the College? Is that forfeit if I leave? Or is it even something they mentioned?"

"They're aware of your current attendance there, Colonel. My understanding is that you can ask to suspend your coursework until you return. If it's for a last-minute deployment, they're usually very lenient about that."

"All right. Thanks." I looked to both of them then. "You're dismissed."

Once they filed out, I was left with the beginnings of a headache that would likely only grow as the afternoon wore on. This news was terrible, on all fronts. The fact that the situation on Requiem was getting so out of hand they were considering bringing in another regiment to help, the fact that I'd only just gotten home to see my family for the first time in half a year and already had to leave again, and the fact that I was currently a fucking mess with meds that didn't work right and an ever-growing penchant for fermented liquid. And besides all that, I was in the middle of some of the most challenging - and rewarding - academic experiences possible. If these orders went through, nearly all of it would go up in smoke.

Only one piece of good news had come out of this. That if I had to take off, my spot at the College was safe...but only if I came back alive to claim it.

\* \* \*

><p>I was in a foul mood by the time I got home later that evening. I thought I couldn't take much more and had resolved to spend as much time with my kids as I could - not only to make up for being gone on Khan for six months, but now, also to cover up the fact that I might very well be departing again shortly.<p>

Most of my plans evaporated after I'd greeted Gabriel and Olivia and Liam, though, since I saw that their father was in much the same state of saddened shock as I was.

Bracing myself for more bad news, I walked over to where Willis sat on one of the stools in the kitchen, looking over some paperwork that seemed to have come from the envelope at his feet. A real paper letter. That was never a good sign.

"What's that?" I asked, too worked up to bother with the pleasantries. If more shit was about to hit the fan, I just wanted to know about it at this point so I could take it in.

Willis didn't reply right away, however. Instead he kept his grip on the letter, his head hung low.

Then I remembered. "That's your evaluation, isn't it? They didn't clear you?"

He shook his head, and his voice was rough when he finally spoke.



"No. I'm still not cleared to fly. It's been four fucking months since the crash, Natalie. My career is over."

"Hey, watch the language," I said, noting with a small sigh of relief that the kids were out of earshot as they sat playing a game in the other room. "What is this about? Did they really say that? Let me see the note."

Slowly he held out the pages for me to look at. I quickly scanned the contents, starting with the standard introduction of "To Major Hawk, William Peter, UNSC Marines" and then moving on to the bulk of the text. I read the words "no significant improvement in flight function," and "return to normal activity without further restriction has been granted, but basic motions required for flight not present". I glanced down at the bottom then where the words that would have truly hit Willis where it hurt most were typed: "At this juncture, the following actions should be reviewed by the patient. Either a) whether the physical rehabilitation regimen has been beneficial and might continue to be, with a limit of six months of continuous therapy, b) whether a change in Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) might be considered, or c) whether a separation from the service might be assessed, under the article of medical discharge."

I blew out a breath when I was done reading, trying to take it in. The language in the evaluation was in no way uncertain. As of now Willis had three options to choose from, and none of them sounded good.

"This is the opposite of what we were hoping for, Coop."

"Yeah. I know."

He let out a sigh. "I can either keep doing therapy that doesn't work for another few months and hope it'll pan out, change my job, or get out of the Marines. Not one of them say I can still fly a bird."

"I know, honey," I repeated softly. "I'm sorry."

I put my hands against the counter and leaned on them, looking down at the ground. I wasn't sure what to say to someone I loved who'd just had all their hopes and dreams dashed. Before we'd always held out the hope that the doctors were wrong, but this looked pretty definitive.

Finally I placed a hand on his back and said, "It's up to you, Will. I can't tell you whether you should try some more, or go, or stay. Do what you feel you need to do. The family is fine with money so we'll survive either way. You need to find what you can be happy with."

My husband shook his head. "I don't know if I can stay without being a pilot, Coop. And I'm not so sure I want to keep trying."

"So you want out?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

The idea was as foreign to me as an undiscovered species. By now we'd both spent our whole adult lives in the Corps. I couldn't even imagine anything else for either of us. Willis had always been a pilot, or studying to be one. It was what he did and what he was,

just like I'd always have my closest ties to the infantry. I wondered how leaving would change him - and us - if he decided to go that way.

Eventually he sighed again. "Well, it's a good thing you're going for O-6, Cooper. You might just be the sole breadwinner for a while."

He said it with such dejection that I didn't have the heart to tell him that soon, I might have to put even that on hold. And that I could be taking off on deployment again, too.

## 10. Chapter 9: Family Values

### \*\*Chapter Nine: Family Values\*\*

\*\*\*\*0406 Hours, June 23, 2558. Cooper-Hawk Residence, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Ups and Downs," Planet Earth. Prologue to the War of Tomorrow\*\*\*\*

I was seventeen in the dream this time, fourteen years ago and in a vastly different setting than what I'd encountered before. This wasn't one of my campaigns as a young second lieutenant, or a battle-scarred first lieutenant, or a veteran captain, or even more recent dreams I'd had about being a major on Khan. This was from even earlier, when I was still in high school and had just met the man I'd spend the rest of my life with - Willis.

But before that, there'd been Ethan.

I was already sobbing in the dream when it began, and all I could think - all I could feel - was fear. Soon that was replaced with pain as I was shoved hard into the wall, then slapped in the face, and finally sucker punched. He thought I was already in love with Willis then, that I was going behind his back. I wasn't, but that mattered little to Ethan. He was good at making a story out of anything and blowing everything out of proportion, even before Willis had entered the picture that school year - and when Ethan got angry, it was always me who was his target.

"You called him? Why is his number on your datapad? \_Why\_?"

I couldn't see through the tears, couldn't get enough air in my lungs to answer as I lay on the ground on all fours from the hit. It was pathetic and had it been now, I would've grabbed the fucker by the balls and dropped him down with me, dishing the hurt a lot worse than I got. But I wasn't like that back then, and all I could do was take his rage.

"He's...he's my friend," I whimpered in a small voice.

"No, he's not \_just your friend!\_ You two were at his house together, alone! Do you think I'm stupid?"

I got kicked in the ribs this time, finally collapsing completely on the ground. It was then I realized that this was a nightmare retelling of the day Ethan had beaten me so badly I'd gone to the hospital. The last time he'd ever lay a hand on me again.

The dream went a little differently than in real life, though. As

Ethan gathered up his fist for another blow, Willis came bursting through the door to the room, oddly dressed in fatigues he'd only don a few years later and carrying a submachine gun in his hands. He aimed it right at Ethan, who'd suddenly turned into the Flood form we'd run into on our mission in Austria during the War. We'd known it was him for sure because I'd found Ethan's dogtags after I'd shot him with my shotgun to finally put him down.

Here, though, Willis stood his ground while Ethan's Flood form went after me. Arms waving and warbling in that horrific noise, Flood Ethan swung one of his appendages at me while I continued lying there crying. This time when I got up though, I was suddenly in fatigues, too, shotgun in hand, and I rose up and kicked at his chest with my combat boot, shoving him back. I took all the hurt and the pain and the rage of that long period of abuse and I went after him with everything I had. I didn't want him dead, but a part of me had always wanted to see him pay in some way for what he'd done. The real courts had given him nothing more than a slap on the wrist. He deserved more.

In a fit of fury I threw the gun to the side and rushed him, tackling the Flood form to the ground and landing hard on top of him. Willis stood by his head, keeping his weapon trained on him, but neither spoke nor took any action himself. This was my time, and he let me have it.

Because after Willis had stopped Ethan, and I'd fallen hard for him and discovered what it was to be in a relationship that was healthy and good, I'd learned to value myself. To take care of myself and take shit from no one, something joining the Corps had instilled in me to an even greater degree. Now I had the tools and the self-assurance to get after the pricks like Ethan, and to never let someone control me through fear again.

In the dream I swung my fist at Ethan as he'd done countless times to me, for reasons imagined or even no reason at all. Revenge was wrong but it was cathartic, and as a Flood form it didn't bother me as much. I punched and punched and punched until the creature stopped moving, and just as I made a move to stand again, breathing hard, Willis stepped in closer.

"He's not dead," he said to me plainly.

I gave him a questioning look for a moment...then noticed too late that he was right.

Closely mirroring real life, Flood Ethan got up when we least expected it and slammed into Willis, throwing him hard against the far wall. I yelled out in the dream as my husband's body went limp and his chin hung low against his armored chest, unmoving.

Frozen in anguish, I didn't think to put up a defense when Flood Ethan whipped around and returned his attention to me. Almost slowly he moved in, backing me up to a window, and with a crazed grin - something impossible on his gnarled and decaying face - he pushed me out.

\* \* \*

><p>The last thing I remembered was the sound and feel of being

forced through breaking glass. I woke up with my heart thudding inside my chest and sat straight up in bed, ready to react to the adrenaline coursing through my body. In a minute I slowed my breathing, though, and realized the nightmare was over. Ethan had been dead for six years now, I reasoned to myself. And Willis was lying right beside me, still asleep and very clearly alive. The house was quiet. There wasn't anything wrong.<p>

Yet in some way, I still felt that there was. I had an indescribable feeling of impending suffering and I couldn't make it go away enough for me to lay back down and try to return to sleep. Not after a dream like that. So once again, I found myself getting up alone in the middle of the night.

Awake now and unsure of what else to do, I simply did the same thing I'd done the last time and pulled on some sweats to venture out into the kitchen. There I fished out the bottle of liquor I'd raided last time and poured some into a glass, then took a long swig. Almost immediately I felt a calm settle over me, and while the dream was still fresh in my mind, I wasn't as bothered. It was like peace.

\_Well, if the meds won't do the trick, at least this does,\_ I thought.

I remembered to put the bottle away this time and moved over into the living room, flicking on the holoscreen at a low volume before throwing myself down on the couch. I wasn't about to sit there in the dark on my own again and brood. At least this way, I could maybe take my mind off things.

I'd been watching for about twenty minutes when I heard a panicked, "\_Mom!\_" come from one of the rooms. I got up as if on a spring and bounded through the hall, rushing into Gabriel's room. My heart only steadied once I was inside and saw him sitting up in his bed, looking sleepy but scared.

"Gabe? What's wrong?"

He reached out for me and hugged me hard before I could even sit down on the edge of the bed. I ran my fingers through his light brown hair as I hugged him back.

"Honey, what is it?"

"I...had a...bad dream," he said with a quivering voice. "It was...about you."

"Me? Why? What happened?"

He sniffled against my shirt. "You died," he whispered. "You left us and you didn't come back."

"Sweetheart...I'm not going to die. I'm not going anywhere." The words stuck in my throat as I knew that I couldn't be sure about the latter part - or the former really, either. But for now I didn't want my son being even more afraid, and I wasn't quite ready to impart the news to my family yet about Requiem until I knew for sure. "Where are these ideas coming from?"

"I don't know. I get worried when you and Dad have to leave."

Those words were like a stab to the heart. As much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn't always protect my family from the realities of the job we'd chosen. But knowing it caused my firstborn this much distress was worrisome. What hurt even more was that I knew he'd already been through a number of traumatic events in his young life, when he'd been a little under three years old and had to go through the battle of Earth. He'd also had to say goodbye to Willis and I more than once, when we'd left on missions and most especially when we'd had to go to Kenya - the final fight both Willis and I had thought we wouldn't come back from. It was no wonder the poor kid was left spooked.

I was about to whisper more assurances when Willis came into the room, rubbing at his eyes but looking concerned.

"Natalie? Gabe? Are you guys okay?"

Gabriel, still holding onto me tight, nodded. "Dad, I'm...sorry. I know I shouldn't...cry."

A corner of my husband's lips curled up as he made his way to the other side of our son's bed. "Nope. You're a big boy now, and your brother and sister look up to you so you've got to set the example. But being tough doesn't mean you never get scared. What happened?"

"He had a nightmare," I answered. "About me."

"A nightmare?" Willis asked, ruffling Gabe's hair that looked just like his own. "Then you know that whatever it was, bud, it's definitely not real. Me and your mom are still here, and we're both okay and so are Liam and Liv. None of us are going anywhere anytime soon. So what's there to worry about?"

"N-nothing, I guess."

"That's right. So let's get you back to sleep and you'll see us again in the morning, okay?"

"M'kay."

As Willis tucked our son back into bed, I felt bad about not saying anything then. But I figured the middle of the night wasn't the best time to broach the subject. I guess it would never be the right time, but for now, with my son feeling comforted by the presence of both his parents, I didn't want to ruin the moment.

\* \* \*

><p>Going through my classes the next day felt like a chore. Not only because I hadn't gotten a lot of sleep the night before, but also because I had looming concerns about if and when we were going to get new orders to deploy, something I'd thought wasn't going to be a possibility for at least a year. And because things with Willis - and what he was going to do about his career - were still very uncertain. I almost relished gym hour since I was able to work out hard enough to block out anymore thoughts, and concentrate only on keeping my body honed for the next field exercise - or real-life mission. Either

way, I was going to need all I had.<p>

At the end of the day I stopped by the regiment offices, if only to allow myself to breathe a sigh of relief when I found out we weren't getting shipped out quite yet. What I did hear from Major Brewer, however, wasn't exactly good news.

"Ma'am, I was going to leave about an hour ago, but we had an incident during training out there today," she said to me, running a hand through her short red hair. "Major Mullen was badly injured."

I frowned as I stood in the hallway. "How bad?"

"Pretty bad, Colonel. He got too close to an explosion during live-fire and got himself a concussion and a couple of broken ribs. One of them didn't break too cleanly and he's going to need surgery, plus recovery time."

"Dammit." I put a hand to my temple. "So what you're saying is, if we do end up leaving for Requiem soon, he's not going to be healthy enough by then to come with us."

"No, ma'am. And that leaves us with a void in the command spot for the 904th Battalion...unless you want Captain Warfield back on board."

I snorted. "No. He caused enough trouble last time he got promoted. He can't be leadership material until he learns to take orders." Truth was, he was lucky I hadn't officially court-martialed him after his persistent insubordination on Khan. What I'd done instead was demote him from his former rank of major, but even that was a lesser punishment than sending him in front of a military judge.

"Anyone else we can use as a replacement if we have to, then?"

Wracking my brain for a moment, I thought of a possible candidate or two but eventually dismissed them as having too little experience. Then a thought began to form in my head. "Actually, I think I might have someone in mind, Major. But he's not from the regiment, and it might be hard to get him."

"Who, ma'am?"

"One of my classmates at the College," I replied. "His name is Major Justin Delaney."

\* \* \*

><p>Later that evening I was sitting with the twins at the kitchen table, studying more material from class while they colored. Having already forgotten about early this morning, Gabriel was out in the living room with Willis, having a blast playing some games together on the holoscreen. I could hear both of them laughing on occasion and it made me smile. I was glad that despite all the challenges we were currently facing, they could still find time to relax and have fun.<p>

I tried my best not to think about the fact that soon, I might not be able to enjoy the luxury of having my husband and son close by

anymore, just in the next room. Or the twins next to me either, for that matter. I swallowed hard.

"Mommy, what're you reading?"

I glanced up and saw my daughter staring at me with green eyes that mirrored my own, and the same long brown hair. I picked her up from the seat beside me and sat her in my lap to show her. "Stuff for my classes. This chapter's about how to move around tanks and trucks."

Though she probably wouldn't be too interested in the details, I knew she'd like seeing the pictures and diagrams. There weren't any graphic depictions of battle in the textbooks we used, only representations of the best tactical approaches and photos of the types of equipment we'd use.

"Wow," she said after a while of scrolling through the pages. "Are there planes in there, too?"

"Yup. A whole other chapter on 'em. As a colonel I need to know how to work with all kinds of things."

Her eyes suddenly lit up. "Really? I wanna see!"

I chuckled and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "You're your father's daughter, all right. Okay, here's the chapter on moving around all sorts of planes."

"Cool!"

Olivia had had a love of all kinds of aircraft since birth, something I attributed to Willis's own passion for the same things. I knew for sure it wasn't something she'd gotten from me, since I had something closely resembling a phobia to being inside any flying bucket I couldn't fight my way out of, like I could on the ground. After a moment Liam came over to check out the pictures, too, and soon my study session was usurped by the greater wants of my two four-year-olds.

They were both peering down at my datapad, captivated, when Willis and Gabriel walked in.

"Hey, what's that?" my oldest son asked.

"Pictures from my textbook. Want to take a look?"

"Yeah!"

"Okay, five more minutes, guys. Then I need to get back to reading, please."

While the kids sat around the table, engrossed in the pad, I made my way over to Willis and rested my head against his shoulder as he enveloped me in his arms.

My husband kissed the top of my head and asked, "What are they looking at?"

"Just some military hardware. Liv asked me about it first, then she

wanted to see all the pictures of the Pelicans and Broadwords and stuff, and then Liam got curious with all of her \_ooing\_ and \_ahhing\_."

Willis laughed. "That's usually how it works. I remember doing the same thing with Jamie and my little brother growing up."

"Speaking of little brothers, have you heard from Matt yet?"

"Not for a while. Supposedly he's still at boot camp doing his thing. He should be graduating in a couple more weeks."

My eyes went wide. "Already?"

"Yup. He's been there eight weeks now. At that point he'll officially become a UNSC Marine like us." Willis let out a heavy sigh. "Jesus. Isn't that a scary thought? Soon I'll have someone else to worry about. Like you and my little sister weren't enough."

I gave him a squeeze. "We'll be fine, Will. All of us. We all survived the Flood, and the War, and Khan. Whatever comes next should be a piece of cake after everything else."

What I didn't say aloud, however, was that I already had a pretty good idea what the next big thing would entail.

## 11. Chapter 10: When Duty Calls

**\*\*Chapter Ten: When Duty Calls\*\***

\*\*\*\*\*1832 Hours, June 27, 2558. City of Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Long-Awaited Message," Planet Earth. Prologue to the War of Tomorrow\*\*\*\*\*

A few days later I left the grounds of Pensacola's War College as quickly as I could once my classes were over to get back into the city. I had an important engagement this evening that I didn't want to miss: my son Gabriel's first soccer match since he'd started camp.

I was thankful to arrive just on time at the sound of the starting whistle blow, looking around for a minute for Willis and the twins before spotting them standing on the sidelines close by. I cut my way through the crowd, passing mostly gatherings of other military families, and returned salutes from a number of Marines still in uniform. Right now I was none too pleased by the protocol; I simply wanted to watch my kid play.

Willis turned as I approached and gave me a small grin as he held Olivia up on his shoulders. Little Liam stood beside him, quietly taking everything in.

"Hey, honey," he said, leaning down a little to kiss me. I kissed him back - technically not something we were supposed to do since Willis was in uniform this time, too - and I heard our daughter make a heaving noise.

I smirked as we broke apart and looked at her. "Hi, Liv. I see you up there, too."



"Hi, Mommy. We're watching Gabe play!"

"I know. Let's see how your big brother does." I walked over to where Liam was then and stood behind him, putting my hands on his small shoulders as I pulled him against me. "How about you, little man? You having fun yet, baby?"

"Uh-huh!" my youngest son cried. "Daddy said we get hotdogs after the game if Gabe scores a goal. I really hope he gets it in."

I laughed and exchanged a quick glance with Willis. "Well, I guess that's one way to get you guys engaged."

We watched without distractions for a while, cheering on Gabriel and his team as they hustled up and down the field. He had a good shot on goal at one point and both twins held their breath, waiting for the kick that would grant them a junk food dinner, but it didn't happen just yet. Gabe was beaten at the last second by one of the defenders on the other team, and then the ref blew the whistle for a corner kick that another kid on our team took.

"Aw," Liam whined, tugging on my arms and stepping up onto my boots to see better. "I wanted hotdogs."

"Li, there's still a lot of the game left so don't get discouraged, little buddy," my husband said. "And stop using your mother as a gym set."

What our youngest son was trying to do now was use my arms to hang off of. When he'd been smaller I'd been able to hold him up like that without a problem, but he'd grown a lot while Willis and I had been on Khan. Especially after a physically demanding day at the College, I didn't have enough left in me to get him off the ground. Luckily his dad's scolding did the trick and he stopped...for the moment.

Halftime finally came around and Willis set Olivia down to go run around the empty field for a while with her twin brother. In the meantime Gabe remained in a huddle with his team and their coaches on the other side.

"We need to look into getting the twins into something active, too," I said to Willis now that the kids were gone. "I don't think their day camp is taking good enough advantage of their energy levels."

"I can take them over to the park for a while during the second half. It's just down the street from here. I think they've stood still for as long as they possibly could."

I gave him a look. "Should I just tell them Gabe scored when you get back so we can have that barbecue?"

"Nah. We're doing it either way. They just don't know that."

We stood there side-by-side for another moment, not getting too close because of regulations while we were in uniform. I looked over at his though and wondered again how much longer I'd get to see him in it.

"Have you made a decision yet?" I asked quietly.

My husband folded his arms across his chest and shook his head. "No. It's a big leap to make, Cooper. And I'm still not sure which way to jump." He sighed. "But I have to choose soon. The letter gave me fourteen days to make a move, and one week's almost gone already. I guess we'll find out soon."

I reached over to squeeze his arm in silent support when my datapad buzzed. I pulled it out of a pocket on my uniform jacket and frowned. "This is from the regiment," I said to him. "I'll be right back."

After stepping out of earshot, I answered the call. "Lieutenant Colonel Cooper here."

"Ma'am, this is Lieutenant Lloyd. Is this a bad time? I noticed you didn't stop by your office today, so I - "

"I'm at my kid's soccer game, Cal. I'm guessing it's important, so just tell me."

It was obvious he'd been spending time with Brewer again. She was the usually the one to get a little longwinded instead of cutting to the chase.

The ONI operative released a sigh on the other end, and that's how I knew for sure the news was bad. "I won't sugarcoat it, Colonel. I got the follow-up message from HighCom just now. The 52nd's going to Requiem."

I suddenly felt like someone had dropped a bucketful of ice on me, but I tried not to let it show. "How soon?"

"Two weeks, ma'am. That's all the time they're giving us to prepare, so they must need us out there ASAP."

"And the port - I mean, have they even found a way to get us there?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be giving you and Major Brewer the full briefing on that tomorrow. In the meantime, you're going to need to contact the Dean at the College and let him know about the situation so they can suspend your classes. HighCom's already approved of the departure for you, but it's best to check in just the same."

"Got it. I'll get that done in the morning then. Thanks for letting me know."

"No problem. I just wish the news had been better. Enjoy the rest of that game."

\_I'm going to have to now,\_ I thought to myself as the connection cut, still in a bit of shock. \_This is going to be the last time in who knows how long that I'll get to see my son play.\_

\* \* \*

><p>I headed back to the sidelines in a daze, feeling sad and upset and overwhelmed all at the same time. I'd only just gotten home less

than two months ago from a campaign that had cost me many precious lives - and almost my husband's and my own. I wasn't recovering from the huge blows that well so far, and I wondered how that might hamper my performance on Requiem. I was also in the middle of War College, Willis was going through a transitional phase of his career, and our three kids were expecting to have me around for almost a year. If I hadn't been sure of what to say to them before, I really didn't know how to share the news now that it was official.<p>

Willis gave me a look as soon as I returned to his side with my arms crossed over my chest, refusing to make eye contact with him.  
"Natalie? What's up? Did something happen?"

"Don't take the kids to the park."

"Huh?"

"Can you guys just stay here while we watch Gabe, please? For me?"

My husband frowned. "Coop, what - "

"Hey, big brother! How's that high life as a major going?"

Both of us turned around at the voice, grinning when we saw who it was. Twenty-year-old Matthew Hawk in the flesh, dressed head to toe in fatigues that bore the symbol of the UNSC Marine Corps, and with one single stripe on his sleeve. It appeared the younger Hawk had come home early as a surprise. He stood there at perfect attention, saluting us, before Willis pulled him in for a hug.

"Christ, Matt! What are you doing here? You said you still had a couple more weeks!"

Matthew chuckled. "Got you, didn't I? Graduated earlier this week. Finally got time off to come see you guys now that I'm officially a PFC." He glanced over at me. "Like the new look, Nat?"

"Love it," I said, still beaming. "Come here, kid. Congratulations."

I gave my brother-in-law a hug as well, and then we stepped apart, taking in the newest member of the Corps in our family. Willis peppered his baby brother with questions, like how boot camp had been, how long he was on leave for, what his new unit was, etc. I stood there and listened for a while, then decided to leave the two brothers to it while I went to go get Liam and Liv off the field before the next half began. They went a little crazy too when they saw the new arrival, and ran off ahead of me yelling, "Uncle Matt!"

"Hey, guys!"

Matthew had only just met Gabriel and the twins when we'd gotten home from Khan. Before then he'd been presumed dead after the ship he was traveling on on a school trip during the War had been attacked by the Covenant. My brother-in-law had only been seven at the time, and Willis and I had just graduated high school together on Mars. We spent the next twelve years thinking he was dead until I'd found him in a rebel uniform one night on Khan during a skirmish with the

locals.

His parents had only found out about his survival via video link at the end of our mission, and had seen him only once face-to-face when we'd stopped on Mars to pick up the kids on our way home. It'd been a happy and teary reunion, especially for his mother, and she'd been reluctant to let her younger son leave again when he'd announced his intention to ship off to boot camp right away. Eventually his parents had come to understand his desire, though, and had given him their blessing to attend.

"So how'd you even know where to find us?" I heard Willis ask Matthew then, continuing with the inquiries. Matthew started to reply when I cut him off.

"Honey, the poor kid just got here and you're bombarding him with questions," I said to Willis. "How about giving him a second to take it in and enjoy his nephew's game?"

Willis smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, okay. Sorry, little brother. I'll cool it and let you relax for a while." My husband looked over at me while the kids bounced with energy. "You sure you don't want me to run them over to the park for a few minutes? Might make for an easier night. They're even more hyped now that Matt's here."

"Okay. But don't be gone too long."

"We won't."

As Willis left with Liam and Olivia, the whistle went off again as the soccer game resumed. Matthew and I stood watching Gabe for a minute until he spoke.

"So...do I have to call you 'ma'am' now?"

I smirked. "Sure do. But only on official business. Here you don't need to worry about it so much. I take it you'll be staying with us a few days?"

"Yeah, I'd like to. After that I'm off to visit my parents on Mars. I'm sure they'll want to see the new uniform, and they've been calling and writing me nonstop. Sometimes I think they still can't quite believe I'm alive."

"It'll take them some time. It was crazy finding you out there after all these years. But don't worry. They'll get used to it eventually, like we did. We just got a lot more time with you on Khan."

"Yeah, I know. We'll work it out." He rubbed at his nearly bald head, his light brown hair shaved close to his scalp. "So what's the scoop on the homefront here? How's my brother doing?"

"We take it day by day. He's fully recovered from his wounds now, but his therapy to return to flight status hasn't been going well. They sent him a letter the other day saying he has two weeks to decide whether to keep at it for another few months, switch MOS, or leave the Corps."

"Ouch. What did he choose?"

I shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. I don't think he's even decided himself yet." I let out a sigh then. "And there's more."

"What?"

I gave him a look. "I haven't told your brother yet, or your nephews or niece, so keep it on the down low."

"Okay."

"I'm shipping out in two weeks with the 52nd," I said in a rush.

His deep brown eyes went wide. "Holy shit. And you haven't told Will yet?"

"No. I just found out for sure a few minutes ago, actually. I didn't want to stir anything up until it was official, and now that it is...we're here, and you showed up. I was going to wait until we got home tonight, but I'm not...really sure what to say."

Matthew glanced down at his boots. "I get it. But how can they even order you to deploy? I thought you were studying at War College right now to make full colonel."

"I am. Apparently that doesn't matter when they need you bad enough."

"Guess so. Where are you guys going?"

I was about to tell him that I couldn't say when we heard someone clear their throat behind us. Matthew and I both turned around to see Willis standing there, the twins still coming up behind him. I hadn't even realized that much time had already gone by.

My husband's expression said he was anything but happy at the moment. He looked right at me with his hazel glare and said, "Natalie? What's this about shipping out? And who's going where?"

## 12. Chapter 11 Mutual Discomfort

### **\*\*Chapter Eleven: Mutual Discomfort\*\***

As usual, things hadn't gone as planned and I suddenly found myself staring down Willis, who looked like a cross between hurt and angry. I'd seen it in his expression before but not lately, and I was trying to deal with mixed feelings of my own on the subject. I couldn't see how he could possibly be mad at me for something I couldn't control.

"I am," I said, fessing up as quickly as I could so the twins wouldn't overhear as they bounded over. "I just got the news and I leave in two weeks."

"You're \_leaving\_? For where?"

I shot my husband a look. "Will, please keep it down. This isn't the time or place to let the kids know. We'll talk about this when we get home, okay?"

Willis seemed at a loss for a moment as to how to take in the news. "But...I don't get it. We just got back from Khan not too long ago. You're at War College. How the hell are you up for another mission already?" Then his steady gaze flickered in anger again. "Did you volunteer for this? With everything our family is going through right now? With our son waking up crying in the middle of the night because he's worried you'll get killed on your next deployment?"

There it was: he thought I'd asked for it. I didn't know whether to laugh or rage back at him, so I did what I figured was more acceptable out in public. "You think I want to be gone right now? Jesus, do you not even notice the kind of shape I'm in? The nightmares and everything?"

"That call you took for the regiment...this was what it was about, wasn't it?" Ignoring my words, Willis narrowed his eyes at me. "How long have you known about this, Cooper? It can't have just come out of the blue."

"Not long. The possibility was brought up a week ago but I didn't want to say anything in case it didn't go."

My husband just shook his head. "Unbelievable. I can't fathom why you wouldn't - "

"Uncle Matt," a small voice behind us said then, cutting into the argument. "Why are Mommy and Daddy fighting?"

Matthew looked like a deer caught in the headlights, clearly unsure of how to respond, so I did it for him.

"We're not fighting, baby," I said to Olivia, crouching down to her level for a second to stroke her cheek in reassurance. "We're just talking." I threw my brother-in-law a pleading look. "You and Li stay with Uncle Matt for a minute and finish watching the game. We'll be right back."

I waited for Matt to acquiesce to my silent request before looking to Willis to do the same, and he gave me a rough grunt as he picked up his feet and moved with me. When we were once again out of earshot - this time of both the kids and the other parents, as well as Matt - we stopped.

"I told you this wasn't a good place to talk, Will," I said to him. "But you can't wait to have it out about this, can you?"

He sighed, still exasperated. "I just want to understand why you're leaving, and why you didn't tell me that it was even a remote possibility when it shouldn't be. I thought we were finally back, Natalie. We're home. Why would you go and fuck it all -  
"

"Goddammit, Willis," I replied forcefully then, getting fed up myself. "I just said I didn't volunteer for it! I was just as surprised as you were by all this. This is absolutely the last thing I want to be doing right now. You think I don't get that this is a bad time for you, and for the kids, and for me and for us? Guess what? No one asked how I felt about going! I just get the call and I go. You know that. You know how this works."

He swallowed hard. "But your classes..."

"Do not exempt me from doing my duty when I'm the only one qualified to do it," I finished. "And if it helps anything, it's an important mission. They really need me for something big, so at least there's that."

"Where?" Willis asked for the third time.

"I'm not allowed to say. I'm sorry, Will. Right now it's just me and my XO and the spook that know. We're not even briefing the troops about the location until we've arrived."

Determined to find something in all this to be mad about, Willis continued to stand his ground. "Okay. So you didn't volunteer. But the fact remains that you didn't even warn me something like this might be coming up, the moment you realized. You know how things are with me and the squadron right now. Everything's up in the air and having a bombshell dropped on me by my wife definitely doesn't help."

I nodded, trying to defuse some of the tension. "I know, and I'm sorry. I just...I didn't want to give you and the kids something else to worry about when we have so much more going on. Especially if it turned out to be a false alarm."

"Well, it wasn't," Willis said with a hint of sorrow and disappointment in his tone. He turned to head back towards the sidelines to watch the game, leaving me standing there staring after him. "And now, we're the ones who have to deal with it."

\* \* \*

><p>The remainder of the evening went as well as could be expected, though it was an awkward affair. We got to watch the last twenty minutes of the match, then we all put on happy faces to congratulate Gabriel and his team on their win. All three kids were excited at the prospect of finally getting hotdogs for dinner, and while Willis fired up the grill in the backyard while the sun slowly made its way down the horizon, I cracked open two cold bottles of beer from the fridge and brought one over to Matt.<p>

"Wow," he said from behind his sunglasses when I approached with the brew. "Haven't had one of these in a long time. We weren't allowed any alcohol in boot. Thanks, Nat."

"No problem," I replied, taking a seat beside him on one of the outdoor chairs on our back deck. I watched as my three kids ran around the yard for a minute, and tried to let the moment sink in as I took a swig. I had a feeling I wasn't going to be getting a lot of lazy late evenings while on Requiem...and I knew for a fact that I'd be leaving the comfort of my own home and my family. The thought made my heart clench so I drank again.

"This is really great, Natalie. You and Will have some nice digs out here."

"Thanks." I snorted. "I guess it pays to be a lieutenant colonel and a major. Sometimes."

"I bet you'll miss it when you're on your mission, huh? Big house, big yard, lots of space."

"Not as much as I'll miss Will and the kids."

"Yeah, about that...I'm sorry he got mad at you earlier. Like I've told you before, my brother can be unreasonably stubborn sometimes."

I chuckled. "It's okay. So can I. I get that it's mostly just him being frustrated with the situation and trying to find a way to come to terms with it. Hell, so am I. I probably like this even less than he does, but it wasn't my choice to make."

Matthew turned his beer bottle up and nodded. "Kind of like me. I'm still waiting to hear about where I have to go to for my first post."

"You branched infantry, right?"

"That's right. I hope it's not somewhere too far away. I'd like to be close to family, now that I'm finally back."

"When do you find out?"

"Should get my orders in a couple days I think."

I decided to go ahead and ask him something that had been bugging me lately. "Have you spoken to your sister yet?"

"Jamie? Yeah. She about blew a gasket when she found out about me, kinda like my parents, and then she started crying. Took me and my mom and dad a while to calm her down. She got over it eventually though and we talked for a while. It was nice." He took another sip from his bottle. "Not too long though, since she's still out on her ship right now." My brother-in-law grinned. "Can't believe she chose to go Navy."

I smiled, too. "Switch it up a little, right? Otherwise we'd have a family full of jarheads."

My oldest son caught my attention then as he played around with his siblings. Liam had a football in his hand and Gabriel tackled him to the grass pretty hard, eliciting a loud yelp from my youngest boy.

"Gabriel Matthew Hawk!" I shouted, standing up. "Be gentle with your brother and sister! They're a lot smaller than you!"

Gabe looked up from the grass with an embarrassed expression. "Yes, Mom."

"Liam, are you okay?"

"Yeah, Mommy."

"All right. Bring the football over to your uncle Matt. He's going to hold onto it while you guys go wash up for dinner. Hotdogs will be ready soon."



The kids practically jumped all over themselves to get up the stairs to the deck, tossing the ball to their uncle before running inside. I left my beer on the outside table and went in with them to oversee the hand-washing. Once they were done the kids all rushed back out before I could go with them, waiting for the food to be served. That's when I noticed that Willis wasn't out by the grill anymore. Matthew was now, and he began handing out plates to Gabe and the twins.

\_Where in the hell?\_

My question was answered when I felt a pair of strong arms wrap around me from behind. Here in the house we were mostly hidden from view, and Willis bent down a little to kiss the side of my neck. Between that and the small amount of beer I just drank, I practically melted in his grasp, even though we'd been mad at each other for most of the past couple hours. Somehow my body didn't get the memo...or didn't care.

"I'm sorry, Coop," he whispered. "I know it's not your fault. I know you didn't ask for it. But still, you've got to know how hard it's going to be without you this time around with everything that's been happening. And to top it off, this'll be the first time since the War that we've been separated that long." He pulled back a bit and sighed. "It's going to be a tough adjustment. For all of us."

"I know," I said softly. "I wish there was something I could do, but there isn't. I have to go."

He turned me around and kissed me on the lips this time, pressing harder as he pushed me against the counter. I kissed him back, feeling the heat of the moment that we couldn't act on just yet, but also the hurt. This was going to be a lot tougher to handle than last time.

Because when I left in two weeks, Willis wasn't going with me.

### 13. Chapter 12: Overview

#### **\*\*Chapter Twelve: Overview\*\***

I didn't get much sleep that night. It was almost a blessing in disguise, since it meant I didn't have time during the night to go through an elaborate and terrifying set piece on the history of my life so far. But having to face the day with a lack of zees wasn't so great, either.

I showered and dressed mechanically, then went into the kitchen to get myself a strong cup of coffee before heading out. On top of everything else I knew that today Willis and I were going to have to tell the kids I was leaving soon, and I definitely wasn't looking forward to breaking their hearts.

Though I tried to be as quiet as I could as I crept out the front door in the early hours, I heard Matthew stir on the couch just before I left. He sat up from under the blanket and blinked a few times, then looked over at me from across the room.

"Nat? What's going on?"

"Nothing. Just leaving for base. Will and the kids are still asleep. Sorry for waking you."

He nodded sleepily as he put his head back down on the pillow and closed his eyes again. "S'okay. Bye."

"See you later."

My first stop this morning was the grounds at the War College, so I could meet with the dean about my departure. Like Cal had told me yesterday, he was already aware of the situation and assured me my spot was safe when I got back. Before I turned to leave though, I had one more thing I needed to ask him.

"Sir, just out of curiosity...I had an incident occur with one of my battalion commanders recently, and my XO let me know that he wasn't going to be fit for duty by the time we leave. If I were to request that one of the officers here at the College come with us to replace Major Mullen...would that be a possibility?"

The dean gave me a look. "Who're you requesting, Lieutenant Colonel?"

"Major Justin Delaney, sir. I hate to pull him from his classes, but I think we could really use his help where we're going. I'd like to have the best I can gather."

Much to my surprise, the dean nodded right away. "Send me the official request and we'll get him for you. HighCom made it clear that they wanted no expense spared in this operation. You'll have what you ask for."

"Thank you, sir."

Again the dean nodded. "You're dismissed."

It was only after that that I made my way to the regimental offices. From now until I left, that's where I'd be spending most of my time. There'd be no more studying, and no more courses to take - only preparing myself and my troops for the tough fight ahead.

I caught Major Brewer coming down the hall as I made my way to my office. I pulled her aside as soon as we'd exchanged salutes.

"Good news," I said. "I just spoke with the Dean at the College. We're getting Delaney for the mission."

"Great. One less thing to check off the prep list," the major replied. "Did Caleb - I mean, did Lieutenant Lloyd let you know we've only got two weeks to get everything together?"

I couldn't help but sigh. "Yeah. We'll do our best. Is he here now?"

My XO gestured up ahead. "He said he'd meet us by your door. I'm assuming he slipped in from the other side of the building."

For a fleeting moment I wondered if that meant they were off again,

but I had way too much going on in my head to spare that more than a second's thought. Cal was waiting for us where Brewer said he'd be, and I let them both inside my office and took a seat.

"So," I began, placing my hands in my lap for once and exchanging a look with the spook. "You said you had a briefing prepared for us, Lieutenant. Let's hear it."

"Yes, ma'am." The ONI operative pulled his datapad from one of the cargo pockets of his black fatigues and placed it in the middle of my desk, showing us a holographic map of a metallic sphere. "This is Requiem. For all intents and purposes it's a planet, with its own artificial gravity and climate ranges, varied landscapes, flora, fauna, etc. The difference is, you can't just go barging through the atmosphere like any other place. You have to take a back door to the surface."

"Which is?" Major Brewer prompted.

"It's hard to describe, ma'am. Best I can say is it's kind of like a portal of its own on the shield world's outer layer. You have to get sucked into it from there." Lloyd glanced at me then. "I mentioned yesterday that HighCom had found something for us. I'm not sure whether this is lucky or not, but it turns out a viable portal exists within this star system that'll take us right there. So we're not going to have to travel too far out to get a link-up to Requiem. The bad news is, we now know that the reverse is true, too."

I gave a snort. "Let's hope that never becomes a problem. What else?"

"Requiem has a bit of a recent history for us," the Naval lieutenant continued. "As you were already aware of, Colonel, we had forces fighting on its surface for most of the time we were on Khan. ONI decided to dub this the 'First Battle of Requiem'. We won our initial battle there but given the newness of the enemy we discovered on the shield world, and the fact that the victory was more a matter of holding the enemy back than a resounding defeat, our Marines and sailors out there are hurting now. They've been deployed for months, running low on men, supplies, and morale, while our enemies have been amassing their troops and pushing back hard. HighCom says the commander there is close to his wit's end, and that's where we come in."

"The 52nd Regiment will be arriving as reinforcement to the Marines already on Requiem. I got that confirmed yesterday in the brass' message. I'm not sure if that means we're to expect a lot of help from the personnel already on the surface, though, since it sounds like they've been beaten pretty hard lately." Lloyd looked to me, then at Major Brewer. "To be honest, I'm not sure what our numbers are going to look like by the time we get there."

Lieutenant Lloyd paused for a moment to let that sink in. What he was telling us was that while we were technically going in as reinforcements, we were the only "fresh" Marines arriving. As fresh as we could be after coming off a several-month-long campaign ourselves on Khan, anyway.

"Okay. Any idea of the enemies' numbers?" I asked.

Caleb frowned. "Reports vary, ma'am. We could be facing up to three battalions each of both Prometheans and Storm. That'd make us pretty even with the UNSC forces already there."

"So we're not winning this by sheer strength."

"No, ma'am. It's pure blood, sweat, and tears out there, from what I hear. Not a good place to be."

I smirked a little, more resigned than amused. "To quote my dead best friend, it sounds absolutely delightful."

"That's not the only thing we're going out there for, though," Lloyd continued. "The brass also wants us to start setting up a research station there to survey the world. So, sort of like with Khan, we're also going there to be the muscle to back up the civvie scientists in case they need protection. Which they will, given the state of things."

"Great." I brought a hand to my temple. The last time we'd had to work with scientists when we were out on Qamar Island wasn't so bad, but I'd had continual clashes with the lead brain over when enough was enough, and when we had to let the research go in order to save lives. She'd also gotten pretty personal with her attacks towards the end, dissatisfied with my orders, and I hadn't taken kindly to that one bit. "Any idea who's going to be on board?"

The spook seemed uncomfortable for a moment. "Well...in the interest of getting our most knowledgeable group of scientists and Marines out on Requiem, HighCom's decided to send us in with the same team as before. They feel their experience will be a good complement to ours."

Brewer shot me a look. "Couldn't ask for more, huh, Colonel?"

I didn't have the heart to respond. \_Just the fact that we're going is bad enough,\_ I thought to myself. \_Now I know the situation out there is deteriorating, and we've got to babysit a cluster of brainiacs, too. \_One of whom had known my mother, and somehow felt entitled to use that against me when needed.

"Okay," I said then. "I think we've gotten the gist of it now. Basically our trip to Requiem isn't going to be a recreational one. We'll have to keep on our toes and watch all our sectors, make sure the Prometheans and Storm don't run us out. Or kill our scientists."

"Sounds about right, ma'am," Caleb replied.

"Well, at least we've done this sort of thing before. Let's hope we can pull it off again."

\* \* \*

><p>I stayed with the regiment for the rest of the day, overseeing their accelerated training now that we knew we were set to ship out in just a couple weeks. Rather than bright and ready, as I'd seen them before, the expressions out there this time around were glum and resigned. It didn't bode well for the state of morale going into this mess. I knew that on top of everything else, I was going to have to

make a lot more personal appearances at the company and platoon level to get the Marines mentally on board with the mission. Being sent off on another so soon after Khan was taking its toll on everyone, it seemed.<p>

When I got home I knew I was in for even more forlorn faces - those of my two sons and daughter. I was still trying to figure out how to best break the news to them as I walked in.

"Mommy's home!" Olivia shouted, running over to me by the front door to wrap her little arms around my legs. I smiled and stooped a bit to hug her back.

"Hi, sweetheart. Where's your dad and your brothers?"

"Outside with Uncle Matt." She made a face like she thought better of what she said. "Well, Daddy is. Gabe and Liam are playing puzzles with me. Daddy said it was okay because he can see us from here."

"All right. Keep playing with your brothers. I need to talk to your dad and uncle for a sec."

I stepped through the living room then, stopping to give two hugs - one for Liam and one for Gabe - before going through the sliding glass door on the side and out onto the deck. There Matthew and Willis were standing, talking quietly amongst themselves. Both wore perturbed expressions.

"What's going on?" I asked.

They'd turned and watched me come through the door as soon as they heard it click open. Willis faced me first and let out a rough sigh, his arms folded across his chest.

"My brother got his orders today," he answered. "Matt's going with you when you leave."

"Huh?"

Matthew shifted his stance. "I got a message straight from the top earlier this afternoon. Because of my involvement in the mission on Khan, I'm being assigned to the 213th Infantry. It says Major Danielle Brewer's my battalion CO."

"52nd Regiment?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Damn. I'm sorry, Matt."

My brother-in-law shrugged. "Not your fault. I signed up for the Marines, remember?"

"Yeah, but...I bet you weren't expecting to have to leave again so soon."

"Neither were you. It happens."

I looked over to Will, who seemed like he was still processing the

information. Taking a step toward him, I said, "Honey, are you - ?"

"I'm fine. I've had a couple hours to digest it." He shook his head. "I just wish I could go with you two. Letting you go is bad enough, Coop. Now my brother, too, while I'll just be at home deciding what to do, not being able to watch your backs..."

"We'll be fine, big bro," Matthew said with a little more pep in his voice than he appeared to feel. "Nat and I'll watch each other's six."

I nodded, somehow unable to find more encouraging words to say at the moment. This deployment was turning into a crapfest all around, but sometimes you just had to take it and suck it up. Thankfully all three of us knew that.

Willis took a deep breath then and met my gaze. "Okay. I guess that leaves us just one more thing to do. Now that you're home, I think it's time we tell the kids."

"All right," I said in a low voice. "Let's head in."

My husband and I went back into the house and had all three kids sit down on the couch while we stood. Matthew had opted to remain outside, probably foreseeing the uproar we were about to cause. This time it was my turn to take in a deep breath before I began.

"There's no easy way to say this, guys. I know I told you that your dad and I were both going to be home for a long time now, but things have changed. Your dad is staying home with you, but I'm going to have to leave in two weeks."

The small silent stares I got in return were heartbreaking. I wished there was something I could do, something more I could say to make them feel better about things, but there wasn't - and for that I felt...lacking.

"I'm really sorry, babies. I don't want to leave again so soon but I have to."

Willis came up behind me then and put his hands on my shoulders in silent support. "Your mom really hates doing this, guys. And I know you're all sad to see her go, just like me, but it'll be okay. I love each of you very much."

"And so do I," I added, swiping a tear from the corner of my eye.

When I looked back at our kids, the twins continued sitting there in shock. Our oldest looked red-faced, however, and soon exploded in hurt.

"No!" he yelled, standing up from the couch. He balled up his little fists and stared right at me. "You said you weren't leaving for a year, Mom! You lied!"

"Sweetie - " I started, but Willis cut me off.

"Gabriel, do not scream at your mother. She doesn't have any choice in this. This is her job, and mine, and we have to do what we're told. Even if we don't like it or we don't want to."

"That's stupid! And it's not fair!" our eight-year-old roared back.

"That's enough, Gabe," Willis said sternly.

"No! I don't want her to go!"

Gabriel stomped off to his room then without another word, the sound of his bedroom door slamming behind him punctuating his words. Willis and I simply stood there, taken aback, while the twins watched the whole scene with their eyes wide. I saw their bottom lips start to shiver and I got down on one knee to hug them again.

"Shh. It's okay. I'll be back before you know it, all right?"

I squeezed them a little harder and shut my eyes tight, willing myself to believe the same. My heart felt like a giant chasm had just ripped open inside of it at the thought of having to leave them again. I tried my best to contain the tears and I did, but it took every last ounce of self-control I had. After a moment Willis took over for me and I went down the hall to follow Gabe.

It was quiet in his room when I entered; all I could hear was the soft sound of muffled sobs against his pillow. My firstborn son was lying facedown on his bed, looking inconsolable, and my heart absolutely shattered.

I went over to the bed and sat down on the side of it, then leaned over to stroke his back, using my other hand to wipe away another tear of my own. "Baby, please don't cry."

"Why?" came the muffled reply. "You don't care. You're leaving us."

"Sweetheart, of course I care. I would never, ever leave you - or your brother or your sister - if I didn't have to." I leaned down a little further to kiss the back of his head. "I love you, son. And I'm so sorry this is hurting you so much. Because it hurts me, too."

The crying finally stopped, but the sniffles remained.

"Really?"

"Yes. More than you can imagine."

Slowly he turned around onto his back to face me. "But you're a colonel, Mommy. I thought colonels didn't hurt."

I smiled sadly as I pushed my hand through his short, light brown hair, so much like his dad's. "Well, we do, Gabe. Very much. You know you and Li and Liv and your dad mean everything to me, right? Well, when I leave, you get to stay here with him and your brother and sister. I'm going by myself. So of course it hurts."

"So you don't want to leave us?"

"No, honey. Never."

Gabriel mulled that over for a second before he seemed to accept it and let himself fall into my arms. I hugged my oldest child fiercely, knowing that this was much harder on him than his siblings because he'd already had to see me and Willis leave him so many times in the past. I felt awful for my son, and for myself, but once again we both knew there was nothing to stop it.

"Do you promise to be good for your dad for me while I'm gone?"

"Yesh."

"And you'll watch out for your little siblings, like a good big brother?"

"Yeah."

"And you'll tell them not to be sad if they are?"

"Mmhmm."

I kissed the top of his head this time. "Good. Because I'm going to need you to be strong for me, okay? And I'll try to be strong while I'm gone, too. Do you know why?"

"Why, Mom?"

"Because I'm coming back."

#### 14. Chapter 13: Healing

##### \*\*Chapter Thirteen: Healing\*\*

\*\*\*\*0815 Hours, July 9, 2558. UNSC Concord Naval Air Base, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Wrap-Up," Planet Earth. Prologue to the War of Tomorrow\*\*\*\*

I tried my best to sit still while one of the medics in my regiment, Corpsman Michael Reynolds, did his best to temporarily blind me. At least that's what it seemed like as he had me sitting on the edge of the exam bed in the medical wing on base, flashing his penlight first into one of my eyes and then in the other.

"Well, if I couldn't see before, I definitely can't now," I said to him, blinking away the remnants of bright light as he turned.

Reynolds chuckled while he typed something on his datapad. "It's fine, ma'am. You're clear across the board. Looks like your gunshot wounds from the sniper have healed up nicely, and so's that spot where the bullet grazed your arm. You're not pregnant, and you're healthy and fit. Good to go, Colonel."

"Sounds good." I stood and grabbed my uniform jacket from the empty chair beside us and pulled it on, then started in on the buttons. "But there's a couple things I still wanted to ask you about, Doc."



"Shoot."

Frowning, I said, "Something happened out on Qamar that I didn't tell you about, towards the end of the campaign. I came up from the underground chamber once and got dizzy and lightheaded for a minute, and my heart was going wild. And it hurt pretty bad, too. Is that likely to happen again?"

The medic pulled his attention away from his pad. "It might. I mean, you came this close to getting shot through the heart, ma'am. You might still experience irregularities from time to time. But from what I can tell, you've got no major complications from the hit. That's a good sign."

I nodded, trusting Reynolds' judgment completely. He'd had my back for over six years now, and had seen me through so many impossibly tough scrapes that there was no way I'd ever think twice about his diagnosis. I knew if it weren't for him, I'd be dead a hundred times over by now. "Okay. I've got one more for you. My meds."

"Which one?"

"Both." I took a deep breath. "First, I'm going off my birth control this mission. My husband's not going to be with me so I have no reason to take it, and it's one more thing I won't need to worry about while we're out there."

"All right. Your choice."

"Second...my pills for the nightmares haven't really been doing their job lately. I'm not waking up crying or shaking yet, but the dreams aren't being filtered out anymore." I sighed. "Ever since we got back from Khan, they've been getting worse."

Reynolds bit his lip. "That's not good."

"No."

He folded his arms across his chest and sat back against the small counter behind him. "Well, I think the next logical step would be to up your dosage and see if that fixes the problem. I'll contact Dr. Blake and find out if we can do that before we leave."

"Can he make the change in the next two days?"

The corpsman smiled. "She can, yes. Anything else?"

I shook my head. "Nope. I think that covers it."

"Okay. Your pre-mission eval is complete then, Colonel. I'll see you out on the tarmac at 0600 in a couple days."

As I got up to leave, I couldn't help the sudden smirk that came across my face. "What'll this be now, Doc? Our eighth mission together?"

Reynolds grinned too and started checking off the list on his fingers, glancing up at the ceiling for a moment with his blue eyes that contrasted with his short black hair. "Let's see, ma'am. There

was Heath, and Cote D'Azur, and then Lienz, and Buenos Aires, and Quito, New Mombasa and Voi, and then Redwood Falls and Qamar. Even though the last two were connected, you could probably call it an even ten."

I stuck out my hand for him to shake before I left. "Well, then, Doc, here's to hoping this won't be our last."

\* \* \*

><p>I spent the remainder of the morning on base, busy dealing with logistical issues so close to departure, and found it increasingly odd that my second-in-command wasn't in yet. Technically I hadn't given her a time she needed to be here by, but it was already close to 0900 hours and her office sat empty across the corridor. The whole thing seemed curious until I saw Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd striding down the hall, looking more serene than he should have been given our looming takeoff date.<p>

Glancing up from my desk, I shouted into the hall from my open door, "Cal, what on earth's got you so happy today?"

The spook stopped in his tracks and saluted. "Colonel Cooper, ma'am. I didn't realize you were in already. I was told you were getting your medical evaluation done this morning."

"I was, but that ended a while ago so I came here. You?"

"Me, what?"

"Where've you been? And where's my XO?"

Lloyd looked sheepish for a moment before stepping fully into my office. "Oh. Well, maybe it's better if I show you." He walked up and held up his left hand, flashing me his wedding ring. "Brewer and I got hitched last night."

Out of all the twists and turns their relationship had been taking lately, this was the one I'd least expected. I leaned back in my chair and just stared. "Wow. Congratulations."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"How'd you manage that? Last time we talked you said she wasn't too keen on the idea."

He shrugged. "I took your advice and we talked things over. Now that I've been home more, it's been better. And once the news of this deployment broke...we both just thought, 'Why wait?'"

"Fair enough. So where's that new wife of yours?"

"Picking up her daughter - our daughter now, I guess - from her aunt's place. They couldn't watch her today so Dani's bringing Alexis to the child care center on base."

For a second I gave him a look. "But she's eleven."

"Yes, ma'am. They offer programs for the older kids, too."

"Ah. The major will be here soon, then?"

"That's affirmative, ma'am."

"Great. I need her help on a few things." Involuntarily I glanced down at Caleb's ring again. "And I promise we'll try to make this as awkward-free as possible," I teased.

The ONI operative just laughed. "Fair enough, Colonel."

\* \* \*

><p>By the time I got home that evening, I was exhausted. A culmination of two weeks' worth of hard work, training, getting the troops ready, and making sure all our supplies and rosters were shipshape before departure was finally taking its toll. I stepped up slowly to the front door, planning on turning into a vegetable on the sofa with my husband and kids on my penultimate night on Earth. When I unlocked the door, however, I found a very different scene inside.<p>

The house seemed empty and completely devoid of life. Matthew had left over a week ago now on his trip to Mars to visit his parents, and he was due back tomorrow. But the kids could be rowdy even when their young uncle wasn't here; I knew they'd at least be making some kind of noise. I wondered if maybe everyone was just out in the yard and started to head that way until I saw Willis come out of the hallway.

He gave me a small smile when he noticed me, but it looked tense. "Hey, Cooper."

"Hey. Where's the kids?"

"With the babysitter."

"Babysitter?" I asked, perplexed.

"Yeah. I had her take them out for a couple hours." He finally leaned in to kiss me and sighed. "I had to choose today, Natalie."

I kissed him back, then rested my forehead against his. "What did you decide?"

"I told them I wanted to keep trying," he answered, pulling back a bit to look at me. "I've worked too hard all my life to be the best damn pilot I can be to give up now. I'll give the therapy another few months and hope it pans out. If not - " He shrugged. "At least I'll know it wasn't because I quit."

Momentarily overcome with emotion, I took his face in my hands and kissed him harder. "I'm so proud of you, Will. I don't care what anyone else has told us. I know you can still make it."

"Thanks, Coop." He kissed me hard in return, lingering this time. "I have another surprise for you."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. Come with me."

He took my hand and led me into our bathroom, the one closest to our bedroom. As soon as I walked in I saw that the whole place was transformed. There were candles set out throughout the room, producing a calm, soft glow, and red rose petals floating in the bath tub, already filled to the brim with hot water. I turned to face my husband and smirked.

"I'm guessing this is why the kids are gone?"

Willis grinned, too. "Yup." He moved in front of me then and started undoing my jacket. "We've been married eleven years now, Coop. I wasn't going to let you leave without a proper send-off."

And he never had, but this was much more than I'd been expecting. After a long, hard day, it felt perfect.

He finished with my uniform jacket and threw it onto the floor, quickly pulling off his shirt before moving on to mine. He slipped his hands underneath my shirt and slid them up my aching sides while I closed my eyes, relishing the feeling. I soon found myself leaning forward to meet his lips and whispered, "Thank you. For all of this."

Willis's grin morphed into a wicked one as he lifted my T-shirt up and over my head. "I haven't done anything yet, honey. You can thank me after."

I chuckled, so consumed with need I did the rest of the undressing myself, and followed him into the tub once he'd situated himself.

"I love you, Willis," I said to him, sliding my hands over his wet chest grip his shoulders. Willis wrapped his arms around me and leaned up to touch his lips to mine.

"I love you, too, Natalie."

\* \* \*

><p>Later we made love a second time on the bed before we were finally sated. No longer clean but warm and naked beneath the sheets, we lay there quietly together in contentment, simply enjoying the moment. When I thought of how long it might be before I'd see him again once I left, I knew I needed to take in as much of this as I could to get through the months ahead.<p>

"I'm going to miss you so much," I said to him softly.

Willis squeezed me tighter against him. "Me, too, Coop. But we've had to do this before in the past. We'll get through it again."

"I know. It's going to be a lot harder this time, though."

"No argument there. But if you're not even allowed to tell your own Marines where you're going...you said yourself it's something big." He smiled down at me. "Natalie Cooper's going to save the world."

I snorted, reveling in the feel of his bare chest under my cheek. "I don't know about that. Guess we'll just have to see what the situation's really like when we get there."

## 15. Chapter 14: Ready, Set, Lift Off

**\*\*Chapter Fourteen: Ready, Set, Lift Off\*\***

\*\*\*\*\*0552 Hours, July 11, 2558. UNSC Concord Naval Air Base, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Departure," Planet Earth. Prologue to the War of Tomorrow\*\*\*\*\*

"Wow. There's a ton of people here."

I nodded as I stood next to Willis, in uniform like me, and secured my duffel bag behind my back with the straps. Meanwhile I held hands with the twins on either side of me, while Gabriel was beside his dad and Matthew brought up the rear. It looked to be a busy day out on the tarmac, just like my husband said - pretty routine for a deployment that involved over fifteen hundred Marines.

My Marines. And I was looking for a few of them in particular right now, somewhere in the huge throng of uniformed personnel and their families.

Thankfully I spotted my XO fairly quickly because of the red hair - exactly how I used to find my best friend Dean Lewis in the countless dive bars and O-Clubs we used to hit as young junior officers together. The major was standing next to her daughter, whom I recognized because she was tall and had long red hair like her mother's; the only difference was Brewer had her own hair cut short in a pixie cut. And beside the two of them was Alexis's new stepfather, Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd. He had his hands on her shoulders and from the way she looked up at him, I could tell the pair already had a firm bond and that the little girl was going to miss him a lot while he and Brewer were gone.

"Poor kid," I said aloud. "She's just gotten a good father figure in her life and now both her parents are leaving."

Willis cocked an eyebrow at me. "What?"

"That girl over there, with the red hair? She's my XO's daughter."

"Oh." He let out a sigh. "Well, there's a lot of that going around."

I glanced down at my own kids and felt a pang of regret. I still didn't want to leave them, or their dad, but I knew I had to and it was killing me inside. At least this time they'd have one of their parents home with them - and I wouldn't have to worry about Willis's safety so much since he wasn't coming with me. Those were my only consolations as I steeled myself for when the time came to say goodbye.

There were still some things I needed to get done before then, though. I turned to Willis and said, "You got the kids for a minute? I need to go talk to Brewer and make sure all our battalions are good to go."

My husband nodded. "Yeah, sure. We'll be waiting here for you,

Coop."

"Okay." I relinquished my hold of the twins and had them stand next to their father, brother, and uncle, reminding them not to stray too far. Then I leaned in to give Willis a quick kiss on the lips. "I'll be right back."

Since there were hundreds of military families seeing their loved ones off this morning, public displays of affection were a bit more relaxed. I saw evidence of it all around with hugs and kisses and tearful goodbyes, though none of it was over-the-top and it remained tasteful. Had I seen anything out of the ordinary I would've had to issue a verbal reprimand, but my troops were well-disciplined and required little micromanaging. I got over to where Brewer stood with her new family without incident, and both she and Lloyd gave me a crisp salute.

"At ease," I said, returning it. "Cal, if I could borrow your wife for a second, we've got some stuff we need to take care of before we leave."

"Yes, ma'am," the spook said with a small grin, pulling Alexis closer to him. "She's all yours."

As the major and I turned to go, I gave her shy daughter a smile and said, "I'll bring your mom right back, okay? Promise."

Major Brewer didn't speak until we were out of earshot. "Well, Colonel, just by getting a quick glance at this place I'd say we've got everybody. Looks like the mass exodus it should be out here."

I chuckled. "Very true. But you know protocol; the Corps' nothing without it."

"Where are we meeting Harris and...who's the replacement? Delany?"

"Delaney," I corrected. "And Harris is right over there." Before we reached him, I stopped and held out my hand. "And hey, before I forget, congrats on the nuptials. I already congratulated Cal but I think we were in too deep with the logistics by the time you came in to say it to you, too. Am I going to have to start calling you Lloyd now?"

My XO smiled at me as she shook my hand. "No, ma'am. And thanks. I've had my last name for thirty-two years so I don't plan on changing it now. I love Caleb but I wasn't ready to give it up, and it's my daughter's last name too so I wanted ours to still match. Thankfully Cal was understanding."

"Yeah, so was Will. We weren't much more than kids when we got married, but I came from a big family so it was important to me to stay a part of that somehow." I glanced down at my boots for a moment. "We were about to get thrown into the middle of the Human-Covenant War so we did the same thing you and Cal did. Got us a witness and went in front of the judge at city hall and just got it done real quick before we shipped out. Best decision of my life."

Brewer's smile widened as she unconsciously looked back at her new

husband. "Yes, ma'am. I'll admit it took me a little extra time to get on board with the idea because of Alexis, but when I see those two together..." She shrugged. "Makes me feel like it was meant to be."

I smiled back. "When you know, you know, right? Now let's go talk to Harris."

\* \* \*

><p>According to my former XO, the 8th Engineers were all present and accounted for, something I was glad to hear about my former battalion. I'd been with them for four years before getting bumped up to lieutenant colonel and my current regimental command, and I still enjoyed seeing them flourish. Major Brewer and I walked up to Major Delaney next to make sure the 904th Infantry, previously commanded by my late best friend Oliver Hayden, was squared away.<p>

Major Justin Delaney saluted me as I approached, nodding at Brewer in acknowledgment when I gave him the command to relax. He looked about as bleary-eyed as my kids at the early morning hour, not used to getting up before dawn at the War College. Again I felt bad for temporarily putting his career on hold, but we'd needed a replacement at the last minute and the only person qualified that I could think of had been him. I stuck out my hand and he took it.

"Good to see you here, Major," I said to him. "I feel a lot better knowing we have a capable commander at the helm in Major Mullen's absence."

Delaney chuckled and ran a hand over his short, curly hair. "Thank you, ma'am. I'll do what I can. Hell, maybe this'll even bag me some points at the College for when we get back. More battlefield experience."

I nodded solemnly. "Yep. Sounds like we're going to get a lot this mission. I hope you're ready for it."

"Ready as I'll ever be, Colonel. I'm just glad I'm going in with you."

"Thanks. But you know this'll be different than all those sims and tests they made us run."

"Yes, ma'am." He pointed behind him to what looked to be his wife and a double stroller holding two young babies. "I trust you'll get me back home safe to my three girls."

"That's the plan." I glanced over at Brewer and she gave a small tilt of her head. "We're all leaving behind family today, Justin, so at least we can commiserate."

His face momentarily brightened. "See? Just like I said that day, ma'am."

"Yeah. Never thought it'd be like this, though. I'm sorry you had to put your studies on hold."

"No, ma'am. I'm glad to be going. Get to see your strategies in action so I might learn a thing or two. I'm looking forward to

it."

I found myself smiling after a second, too. "If nothing else it'll make everything we've gone through so far at the College seem like a walk in the park. Good luck, Major."

"You, too, ma'am. See you on the big boat."

\* \* \*

><p>Major Brewer and I spent the remainder of the time triple-checking the supplies and rosters. Once we had our reports from the other two battalion commanders, however, there was nothing more we could do to stall the inevitable. It was go time, whether we wanted it to be or not. Enlisted Marines and the junior officers were already waving goodbye to their families as they marched toward the waiting air wing of Pelicans getting ready to take them up to our transport ship, the <em>Onward Journey<em>. Quirky for a ship name, but then again most in the UNSC fleet were - and either way I absolutely hated being aboard one.

Today I knew I'd hate it even more because of what I was leaving behind. I tried my best not to get too emotional in front of my troops, but it was hard. I'd only left my kids on my last deployment recently, and Willis I'd never really left at all. Taking off without all four of them hurt in a way I'd imagined it would, but somehow still made my heart ache ten times worse now that it was the real thing.

"Hey, Will," I said to him, hugging him tightly and cupping the back of his head with my hand as I reached up to kiss him. "Take good care of our babies for us, okay?"

Willis kissed me in return and hugged me back hard. "Of course, Cooper. Stay safe out there. I love you."

"I love you, too."

He kissed me a second time, more passionate and deeper than the first, and I didn't want to let go. I eventually did though, thanks in part to the protestations coming from Liam and Olivia which were led by Matt. I gave him a look and then bent down to my twins next.

I had the two of them huddle around me and I whispered to them, "Hey, you guys take good care of your dad while I'm gone, all right? He's going to need you to be strong, and so will I. I love you both very much."

Liam and Olivia both hugged me hard as well, and I could see tears in their little eyes when I reluctantly pulled back. By now I could feel my own forming behind my eyes, but I still had one more to account for. Gabriel.

"My big boy," I said as I hugged him. "After your dad you're the next man of the house now, you know. Watch out for your little brother and sister, and make sure you help your dad out with them when he needs you, okay? I love you, son."

"I love you, too, Mom," Gabe replied, his response muffled as he



buried his face in my shoulder. "Please come back."

"I will," I answered firmly. "For all of you."

After that I couldn't take the pain anymore and had to pull away before I lost it. I waited for Matthew to say his goodbyes to Willis and the kids, and then together we walked off towards the Pelicans along with the rest of the unit, silent and sad.

## 16. Chapter 15: Marked for Dead

**\*\*Chapter Fifteen: Marked for Dead\*\***

\*\*\*\*Undetermined Shipboard Time, July 15, 2558. Onboard UNSC Transport Ship \*\*\*\*\*\_\*\*Onward Journey\*\*\_\*\*\*\*\*, En Route to Requiem. "The Final Pickup," Inner Colonies. Prologue to the War of Tomorrow\*\*\*\*

The last few days of the voyage had been miserable, mostly due to the fact that I was still reeling from having to leave my family behind on Earth. Things got a little better every day though, and busier, which helped ease the hurt by a tiny fraction and kept my mind occupied on other things.

Presently I was sitting at my desk in my quarters, going through every type of conceivable document and data packet on the mission as well as the regiment. After a while I knew I was going to send myself into a frenzy over this stuff so I resolved to go hit the gym aboard ship for some change of scenery if nothing else. That was until my stomach growled, and I realized I needed to refuel first.

Releasing a sigh, I switched off my datapad and shoved it back into the pants of my fatigues, then pulled on my uniform jacket and stepped out into the corridor. Once out of the senior officers' berthing area I passed a number of sailors and a couple of Marines, all of which saluted me as I went by. I returned the gestures until I'd made my way to the elevator, and took it up a few decks to the mess.

There I went through the line, selected my grub from the food dispensers, and chose a seat at the far end of the chow hall, where I could see almost everything that was going on. Although I could scarcely admit it to myself, I was feeling a little alone now that Hayden had been killed on our last mission and Willis wasn't with me. Matthew was busy making friends amongst his new squad, as he should be, Cal had Brewer, and Reynolds spent the majority of his time down in the medbay. Add to that the fact that it wasn't exactly a meal time - my watch said it was well past 1500 hours shipboard time - and it meant that even the mess, usually loaded with people, was a bit empty at the moment. Being a Marine though I took it in stride and just ate.

Halfway through my sandwich I noticed a shadow looming over me. I glanced up and started when I saw it was my husband's former wingmate and ex-best friend, Captain Brandon Heat - the source of all of Willis's flying woes.

While Willis had been left behind on this mission, his air wing hadn't, so I shouldn't have been surprised by Heat's presence. It'd

been a while since we'd spoken, however.

"Hey, Colonel," he said as he sat across from me. "Long time no see."

"Yep. To what do I owe the pleasure, Heat?"

The captain shrugged. "I don't know. You were looking kind of lonely and I can't let a lovely lady eat on her own."

I snorted and shoved a big bite of my meal in my face. "If you're fishing for information on Willis, you're going to have to do better than that."

Heat made a face. "Oh, come on, Cooper. Throw me a bone."

"I will, but only because you two were wingmates before you even had your wings." I gave him a look. "In case you're wondering, not everything is good in paradise."

"You two fighting about me again?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, actually, and I didn't mean the state of our relationship. I meant his road to recovery to get back on a bird. It might not happen."

Captain Heat seemed genuinely astonished. "You're kidding."

"I wish I was. It would make my life and his a lot easier. But I'm not. He got served with papers a few weeks ago. Told him he could keep trying the therapy, change jobs, or jump ship. Thankfully he chose the former, but not before he gave it a lot of thought."

"Gave what a lot of thought?"

"Leaving the Corps."

Heat eased up and didn't say anything for a while, taking that in. "He was going to leave because of me?"

"Because he can't fly. He's really told you none of this?"

"Nope. I guess I don't rate that after I shot him out of the sky. He hasn't spoken a word to me since he ripped me a new one on Khan over it." He met my gaze. "Honestly, Natalie, it was an accident. I don't know how many more times I have to say I'm sorry about it, or how bad I feel about it, or anything else that I can do to change it. Hell, it kills me that we're out here right now without him. I know it does you, too, and I'm sorry for that. I know it's my fault. But I can't change what happened, and sometimes his stubbornness...it gets to me."

"Well, don't let it. You're one of our oldest friends, Brandon, and certainly his. And no matter what, Will's always had a lot of fight in him. I believe he can still make it past this and get better. And when he does, you can bet your ass he'll want you to be the one watching his six again."

The captain still didn't look too convinced, but he gave a small heave of his shoulders. "Maybe. I guess we'll find out when we get

home."

I'd nearly finished my meal by then and made a move to toss the remainder in the trash when I felt the ship lurch to a stop. My heart went instantly to my gut and started pounding hard. Meanwhile, Heat remained calmly seated in front of me...laughing his ass off.

After I regained my composure, and loosened my death-grip on the edge of the table, I glared at him. "Ha ha. I'm afraid of being on a ship. Keep it going."

"I just think it's hilarious that you married a pilot but piss your pants anytime you're in an aircraft."

"Yup. Haven't heard that one before." A corner of my lips twitched. "It's not like you and Will didn't used to howl over it when we were at the Academy over \_eleven years ago\_."

"No, ma'am," Captain Heat said, all grins now. "Never."

I gestured vaguely at the ship. "So any idea what the hell that was about?"

"You didn't hear the announcement over the intercom an hour ago? We're stopping at a listening station out here to pick up 'an important package'."

"Huh?"

"That's what I said." He lifted his head in the direction of one of the entrance hatches to the mess. "Maybe he can tell you more."

I turned and saw a confident-looking Lieutenant Lloyd walking in with Major Dani Brewer. I almost wasn't able to stifle my laugh. If they were anything like Willis and I had been as newlyweds, this was likely the first time today that they'd stepped out of their shared quarters aboard ship...and it was late afternoon.

"What's so funny?" Brandon asked me.

I waved a dismissive hand at him. "Nothing, Heat. You get back to me once you finally decide to tie the knot and you'll get it."

"Get what?"

At that I stood. "It's been nice catching up, but I'd really like to know why the boat made my stomach drop. I'll see you later."

I left him sitting there at the table and went to intercept the happy couple as they emerged from the line with their trays. I felt bad interrupting, but I was curious to find out what was going on.

"Cal, Dani," I said to them.

They nodded in return. "Ma'am."

"I need to speak to the lieutenant for a minute."

My XO gave a slight nod of her head and went off to seat herself, while the spook came with me to another table. I didn't say anything

until we'd sat down across from each other.

"Do you know what we're stopping for? I gathered I missed out on the message earlier, but I heard it didn't really say what was happening anyway."

"Yes, ma'am. Clearance on this is only granted to the top, although that might not mean much once they're aboard. I can't even tell Dani about it yet."

"Once who's aboard?" I asked.

Unperturbed, the ONI operative dug into his meal. "Our 'important package' is another spook. We're taking him and his team with us to Requiem. They're currently stationed out here so the brass decided we'd give them a lift." He smiled a little in self-deprecation. "Apparently one intel officer wasn't enough for something this big."

"Shit. And you said 'he'? I guess that means it's not Commander Hayden." Lieutenant Commander Courtney Hayden, my late best friend's widow, had accompanied us for the latter part of our mission on Khan, providing Caleb and I with intel on the rebels' movements from the mainland while we were busy fighting the Prometheans and Storm out on Qamar Island. I thought if we were getting another spook, it'd be her.

He shook his head. "No, ma'am. We'll get to meet him soon enough, though. If the ship's stopped that means we're picking them up right now."

I nodded. "All right. Thanks. Go eat with your wife, Cal. We'll go see what the fuss is about once everyone's on board."

\* \* \*

><p>It took the better part of thirty minutes for the <em>Onward Journey<em> to start moving again. That made me think it hadn't just been a single spook and his team that we'd picked up; we'd probably gotten some supplies as well. Regardless, I wanted to meet the newcomer, mostly because I knew I'd be working with him from now on along with the lieutenant.

Lloyd went with me to the portside hangar bay a deck below us, where he'd been told the landing had occurred. I was eager to meet his newly arrived colleague when I saw him coming down the hall and my breath caught.

My mind was instantly overrun with a flood of memory, and none of it good. I had to work to keep the no, no, no racing in my head from escaping me, and when our eyes met, I suddenly felt like prey all over again.

The man walking along the corridor in black ONI fatigues was one I thought I'd never see again in my life. He was dead. I'd been sure of it. So fucking sure. And yet here he was, standing before us in the flesh, his rich brown hair cut short and his matching eyes giving off the appearance of a charming, stand-up guy. But he wasn't, not in the least. I knew that first-hand from the way his fist used to feel when I'd been a stupid young teenager who thought she was in love with a

violent prick.

"Ethan," I croaked.

## 17. Chapter 16: Zapped

### \*\*Chapter Sixteen: Zapped\*\*

For a moment it was as if the last fourteen years hadn't even happened. In an instant I was back to being a scared girl - and all of it was because of the man standing in front of me, who simply smiled at the fact that I remembered his name. Like I could forget.

"Natalie Cooper," he said, his voice carrying an undercurrent of warmth I used to remember from a long time ago - a time before the abuse had started. Back when I'd imagined our relationship was like a wondrous fairy tale and things were going to end happily between us...not with me in the hospital. "I don't even want to think how long it's been since I've seen you."

Still caught up in the fact that he was supposed to be very, very dead, I was too startled to think of anything to say. This was my chance to speak my mind, to bury him with words of anger and hate at what he'd done to me, but I'd spent too many years rebuilding from all of that - pushing it down into the depths of my brain and overcoming it - that I found the speech wouldn't come. Now that he was standing here, no sound came out.

Ethan took the lapse in stride and looked to the other spook instead. "And you're Lloyd, right?"

"Yes, sir," Caleb replied, noting Ethan's rank insignia of a lieutenant commander on his lapel.

Ethan smirked. "Heard you just got married to a superior officer. Nice. I guess that means you're over your mama drama."

"Excuse me?"

"That's 'Excuse me, sir,'" Ethan corrected. "I'm a lieutenant commander." He looked Lloyd in the eyes. "Your mother was a spook, too, wasn't she? I'm told that's why you joined. Because Major Sierra Lloyd was killed by the Covenant when you were four months old, in service to our great Colonies, and you were looking to give her sacrifice some sort of tribute." He shook his head. "So sad. Bet your sister and your daddy Helljumper didn't take her death well at all, either."

Beside me, I could almost sense Lieutenant Lloyd tensing up. I was still too astonished to even move.

All Caleb replied, however, was a terse, "You've done your homework, sir."

"Of course I have. I'm a spook," Ethan answered smugly. "Something you should have done as well if you weren't...too busy basking in your post-wedding bliss." He turned his attention to me again. "Now if you wouldn't mind, I need to speak to the lieutenant colonel

privately."

"Like hell," I blurted, somehow finding my voice at the right moment. I stepped forward and said firmly, "\_I\_ mind, and that's enough. In case you haven't been too observant, I outrank you. You can address me as 'Colonel' or 'ma'am' but you don't get to get away with the familiar with me."

"I used to, once."

"That died a long time ago. You made sure of that."

Ethan seemed like he couldn't be less bothered and flicked his gaze back to Lloyd. "Leave us, Lieutenant."

I almost told him not to, but then I realized that would put my friend in the middle of something I didn't want him to be involved with. This was my demon to exorcise and I'd never be fully at peace if I didn't do it on my own. I gave Caleb a slight nod and he reluctantly walked away.

"Where's the rest of your team, Ethan?"

"Grabbing our supplies. We have a few minutes to talk alone, if you want."

I snorted. "What the hell is there to talk about? I don't want to know shit about you or where you've been or what you've been up to the last dozen years - and I certainly don't want you prying into my life. The only damn thing I want to know is how you're not fucking dead."

He chuckled. "Dead? Who told you that?"

"I saw it. I \_saw\_ your body. So did Willis. I fucking shot you."

This time he laughed out loud, a hearty belly laugh that sent rage flooding through me all over again. "And you're sure this wasn't some kind of revenge fantasy of yours?"

I shook my head angrily. "I had your dogtags, Ethan. They were in my hands. 'Lieutenant Ackerson, Ethan James'. I pulled them from a Flood form in Austria that was a dead ringer for you. Ring a bell?"

"Nah. Refresh my memory." He gave me a look. "Although I do object to having my likeness compared to a Flood form. I remember you mentioning several times while we were going out in high school that I was '\_hot\_'."

I felt my cheeks flush inexplicably and that made the anger even more potent. "Careful, Ethan. I'm not the same person you remember. I've changed."

"So have I. And I'm going to prove it to you."

I scoffed. "How? By acting like a complete asshole just now with Cal? If anything it reminds me what a vile piece of shit you are. I can't believe the Navy took you in after what you did to me, let alone made you an officer."

Ethan's sly smirk returned. "Friends in high places, Cooper. But then you know that."

"Your pathetic excuse of a father can't save you from everything, you stupid - "

"You're right."

His tone changed abruptly and he suddenly sounded so sincere I stopped mid-rant.

"What?"

"I said you're right. He can't. Which is why I made changes to myself on my own. Fourteen years is a long time, Natalie. What makes you think I haven't changed just as much as you?"

Rather than get flustered, I stood taller and marched right up to him like I never would have dreamed of doing in the past and stared him down. "Don't even try to pull this bullshit on me. You will never convince me that you're anything but what you've always been - a manipulative, abusive son of a bitch who is good at twisting people and things and emotions every which way until they suit your purpose. I'm not getting caught up in it again. Do you know why?"

"Enlighten me," he said in a bored tone.

"Because the last time I did I ended up unconscious on your living room floor and woke up in the hospital with bruises and broken bones that you gave me, you worthless shit."

I didn't realize it in the middle of my speech, but I was shaking by the time it was over. There was nothing I could do to cover it up, but I found that was just as well. Just saying these things out loud to him after all these years felt more freeing than all the burying of memories deep down inside me would ever do.

Ethan noticed my change in demeanor and started to speak, but I cut him off with a sharp glare.

"I'm not finished yet," I said. "This is not happening like you think it is. This is not time for you to find redemption, or screw me over again, or do whatever it is you're trying to do here. I want no part of it. From now on, everything goes through my XO. You need to talk to someone in charge about the mission, you talk to her. You don't see me, you don't speak to me. At all. I don't want you anywhere near me, do you understand? Ever again."

Expecting another smug comeback, I was surprised when all I heard was a resigned, "Yes, ma'am."

I didn't give him another second of my time. I turned and left after that, wanting nothing more than to never see his face again.

\* \* \*

><p>Storming off to my quarters was what I wanted to do, but it didn't exactly work out that way. I ran into Caleb further down the corridor and he stopped me, looking pained.<p>

"Cal, what is it?" I asked him. "Is it what he said about your mom?"

The spook waved my question away. "No, ma'am. I've dealt with his kind before, growing up. Kids can be cruel and I used to get teased about not having a mom a lot when I was little."

"Shit. I'm sorry."

Lloyd shook his head. "No, ma'am. I'm sorry. For not doing my job." He folded his arms across his chest and stared at his boots. "He was right. I should have done my homework on him, too. But I didn't, and now he's here. With you."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Finally the lieutenant glanced back up. "He's the one who used to hit you, isn't he?"

I'm not sure why the question surprised me but it did. I'd always known Caleb was privy to every little thing about my life simply by being in ONI; I didn't know why I'd assumed he wouldn't know about this particular part of my history, too.

"Dammit. I shouldn't have told you I knew." Lieutenant Lloyd ran a hand over his dark brown hair. "I'm sorry I brought it up. But why would the brass put the two of you together again, knowing your history?"

I snorted. "That's an easy one. His father did this. He's the only one with that kind of pull. Probably figures a mission like this will make his son's career."

Cal shook his head. "That's not possible, ma'am. The lieutenant commander's father died during the Human-Covenant War, back in 2552. Looks like someone else has it out for you, Colonel."

Although yet another surprising thing I'd learned today, it was good to hear Ethan's dad had finally kicked the bucket. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy...besides Ethan himself, of course. Now I understood what Ethan had meant about not being able to rely on his father anymore to get him out of his predicaments.

But that made a larger question enter the forefront - who in HighCom \_had\_ okayed this, knowing the circumstances?

It was too much for me to take in at once. I resolved not to think about it anymore for the rest of the damn day. All of this had been way too weird.

"Well, I think I'm going to retreat on this one," I said to Cal. "I'm heading back to my quarters and I'll continue reviewing those data packets you sent me. You go see Brewer. I'm sure she's missing you already."

\* \* \*

><p>When I got to my quarters after a long trek back, I dropped down onto my bunk for a moment and just lay there, eyes closed, and wished



the last several minutes would just auto-delete from my head. They didn't, though, so I went after the next best thing.<p>

I got up and walked over to my closet, where my duffel bag and some personal items were stored. I pulled out my pill bottle for the nightmares - now with a higher dosage - and set it on my desk to take in the morning. Behind my bag, I pulled out the half-empty bottle of brandy Javier Laraza had given me on Khan...the one that I'd smuggled onto the ship when I'd boarded, for when times got tough.

I figured seeing my dead ex-boyfriend sure as hell qualified.

After pouring myself four fingers of the amber liquid - three just wouldn't do it for a day like today - I shot it all down in one quick swill. It was only as the alcohol burned down my throat that a thought came to mind: Ethan hadn't told me how he'd managed to survive.

## 18. Chapter 17: A Separate Plane 1

Author's Note: This'll be the last update for a couple of weeks or so. I'm off to Italy next week, and since my home internet decided to stop working last year, I'll have to find other means to get chapters online while I'm there. So it probably won't happen for a bit. Sorry for the delay, but know that I'll do my very best to get Part Two up soon. :)

Thanks for reading and enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter<span> Seventeen: A Separate Plane, Part One\*\*

\*\*1114 Hours, July 20, 2558. Forerunner Shield World Surface, Requiem\*\*\*\*. "The Landing," Epoloch System. Day One of the War of Tomorrow\*\*

The first thing I noticed about the place when we finally made it planetside was the arid vista surrounding us. I'd fought in deserts before, most notably the Reatan Desert on Heath a year prior to the War's end, but this one was different. Rather than vast swaths of sand and the occasional rock formation in the distance, this part of Requiem boasted high cliffs and harsh, jagged terrain all around. There was also more vegetation here, surprisingly; green cactus-like plants and others made the scenery feel less monotonous than Heath had. The heat was still a prominent feature, though, one I tried my best to combat from the start by rolling up the sleeves of my battledress jacket as soon as I touched dirt.

"Well, ma'am," my aide, Staff Sergeant Derek Lynch, said beside me. "We wanted a change from the island and city and forests on Khan, we sure got it."

"Yup." I pushed my sunglasses higher up on the bridge of my nose, gripping my helmet in one hand with my battle rifle still slung behind my back while we distanced ourselves from the Pelican. I took the time we walked to continue surveying the area. "I need to get in touch with command out here, Staff. Make sure Major Brewer knows I'm

going to be gone for a while, and then let's get moving."

"Yes, ma'am."

The trip to the Forerunner shield world hadn't lasted nearly as long as I'd thought it would, thanks to the portal Lieutenant Lloyd had told me and Brewer about back on Earth. Where it had taken us over three weeks to get to Khan in one piece last November, it'd taken about half that time to make it here. Via the portal it had been a straight shot in, which had significantly reduced our flying time - and, in turn, made me happy to have my boots on solid ground again. After a moment Lynch gave me a slight nod of his head, and I motioned for my security team to begin the march.

Walking along at the center of the formation for protection, I found myself gawking at the sheer heights and drops of the rocky desert. This place was like a sniper's playground. And while navigable, the terrain obviously made it difficult to find suitable approaches for ground vehicles - especially tanks - and would make maintaining the equipment even harder. We'd faced a lot of the same hang-ups on Heath, and I had no doubt we'd be repeating some things now as well.

After a while I turned back to Staff Sergeant Lynch. "So where's the outpost?"

He pointed ahead. "Just on the other side of that rock face, Colonel. We should be able to see it when we round the corner."

\_I hope not,\_ I thought to myself. \_With an open desert like this, it doesn't pay to be too inviting.\_

Still, I opened a general COM freq from my earpiece as we marched along to ensure we weren't shot at by friendlies on sight. "Attention UNSC personnel at Outpost Xavier. This is Lieutenant Colonel Natalie Cooper. I'm on approach with a personal detail, anyone copy?"

The static in the line was overwhelming until I finally made out a voice, female. "Copy, ma'am. Please confirm identity."

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper, Natalie McKenzie. UNSC Service Number 38221-50486-NC."

"Identity confirmed. We'll have your six as you arrive, Colonel."

The COM went dead then and I thought that that was a small consolation. We'd been warned before coming here that things on Requiem were in dire straights - hopefully, we'd be able to do some good work here to get it back up to shipshape.

\* \* \*

><p>Staff Sergeant Lynch and one of his fireteams entered the outpost ahead of me, making sure it was all clear before I went inside. I didn't have many expectations based on what I'd been told of the place, but what I saw laid out in front of us was even more disheartening. The outer perimeter was a complete mess, chock full of blast craters and sections where the wall, for lack of a better word, had been blown out and lined with pockmarks from enemy fighters. Here

that seemed to include both the Prometheans and Storm, from what I could tell. I knew I'd get a full brief from the officer in charge shortly so I could ask.<p>

All in all, there was a lot of work to be done at Outpost Xavier.

"Doesn't look like the best place to be, ma'am," Lynch said beside me. I followed his gaze to a young Marine in filthy fatigues crouched by the wall, obviously tired and haggard with something approaching a beard as he manned the lines. All I could do was shake my head.

"Yeah. Looks like they just lost all faith and sense of purpose. I wonder who's in charge of discipline here. They're not doing a very good job."

The staff sergeant gave me a head's up. "I think we're about to find out."

A female senior non-com jogged up to us then, looking equally devoid of hygiene and wearing an expression of utter exhaustion from lack of sleep. Still, she did her best to look prepared for us, standing at straight attention and saluting me as she came up.

"Colonel Cooper, ma'am. I'm Gunnery Sergeant Angela Benson. Welcome to Xavier."

I returned the gesture and glanced around again. "Gunny. I was hoping you'd be able to take us to whoever's in charge out here. I've found a few bones to pick with them already."

Gunny Benson nodded. "Yes, ma'am. That'll be the skipper. Over this way."

My eyebrows raised at hearing the word "skipper", but I supposed that I shouldn't have been too surprised considering what I'd observed out here so far. I followed the gunnery sergeant through the outpost to the inner quad, filled mostly with a series of large tents, and was prompted to enter the biggest one. Standing there over a projected holo map from a datapad was a Marine a little older than your typical captain, maybe a few years my senior. He turned when he heard us walk in and immediately saluted.

"Ma'am. I trust Gunny Benson got you here safe."

"So far so good, Captain," I replied. "But maybe you want to tell me why this place looks so piss-poor right now?"

The captain released a sigh. "There's that." He gestured vaguely to the map, full of red zones that I assumed were controlled by the enemy with one green dot in the middle - Outpost Xavier. "I'm Captain Tanner Diaz, Colonel. And as of last night, I'm also the outpost commander. Well...was, now that you've shown up."

I let out a low whistle. "How'd you manage that?"

"The usual, ma'am. Enemies by the hundreds attacking an outpost originally outfitted for only three companies. Now we're down to only two platoons and fighting tooth and nail to keep what's left of this

little row of shacks in one piece." He shook his head, full of black hair shaved a few centimeters from his scalp. "It's been hell."

"Sounds like it. I take it your previous commander wasn't too used to dealing with something like this."

Captain Diaz shook his head vigorously. "No, ma'am. We've been floundering since he - " He suddenly stopped mid-sentence and looked at me. "Apologies, Colonel. I didn't mean to - "

"No, go ahead, Captain. Speak freely. I want to know how you guys ended up in such bad shape. Someone in HighCom needs to know about this."

He stared at me for another minute, quietly assessing, before nodding and going on. "All right. Our CO was another lieutenant colonel, Vincent Magnese. Didn't know his head from his asshole, if you'll excuse the candor. Somebody had a grudge against him because I hear he had a cushy desk job before this assignment, and was one of the only lucky bastards to escape much combat during the War. Obviously bad news for him and for us.

"He got killed real quick on day six. After that, it fell to Major Rosa - Hillary Rosa." The captain swallowed hard and I got the distinct sense that the two had become more than comrades out here. He took a deep breath and continued. "She did her best, but there just aren't that many of us left. Last night the Storm attacked again and she was shot through the neck. Bled a helluva lot. She's in intensive care in the medtent right now fighting for her damn life. She's not expected to make it."

I reached out and placed my hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Diaz nodded again, silently this time. It was another moment before he spoke again. "I was her XO so I took over the Marines who remained when she went down. But as you can tell, we're not really much of an outfit anymore."

"I guess that explains why we're here, then," I said softly. Running a hand through my put-up hair, I added, "Now you won't have to worry about not having the personnel or the gear to fight off the enemy assaults, Diaz. We're fifteen hundred strong and with your help, we'll get this outpost up and running again. I just need to know what we're up against."

At that Captain Diaz snorted. "You mean what we aren't up against? We've had so much shit thrown at us the past several weeks I've lost count of how often we're hit by something."

"I noticed the scorch marks and craters on the wall outside. You're seeing a lot of action from both factions, aren't you?"

"Affirmative, ma'am."

I exchanged a glance with Staff Sergeant Lynch. "Then I'll take my security detail and you can show me around. I want to know what this structure's weaknesses are - besides the obvious - so we can start patching things up today. This needs to be a ton better by

nightfall. I don't want us to keep losing Marines by the handful when we've just gotten here."

Diaz seemed relieved that he was no longer the one in charge. "No, ma'am. Sounds like a plan."

I gestured towards the tent entrance. "Lead the way."

The captain was more than willing to oblige, but the shield world's other inhabitants weren't. We'd just made it back to the outer wall when the sound of gunfire erupted on our flank.

Captain Diaz turned to me with wide dark brown eyes. "That's third squad from second platoon," he said, listening in on a COM frequency I hadn't picked up yet. "There's been a breach."

Pulling my battle rifle off my back, I rapidly cocked the weapon and held it across my middle, barrel facing the ground. I left my helmet sitting on a rock in the meantime. "Let's go plug that hole."

"You're coming with me?" For a moment he gave me an incredulous look. "With respect, Colonel, wouldn't you rather wait in the command tent? It's a lot safer."

"Probably. But I didn't travel all this way to sit on my laurels. \_Move\_ it."

## 19. Chapter 18: A Separate Plane 2

Author's Note: Managed to get a bonus chapter up before I leave. Hope you enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Eighteen: A Separate Plane, Part Two<span>\*\*

My security detail and I sprinted fast behind Captain Diaz towards the fighting. It was only when we reached the far edge of the perimeter that I was able to see what all the scrambling was about - the Prometheans were rushing the outer wall.

"Shit," I muttered, bringing my battle rifle to bear as I stood and firing off a quick burst at one of the Watchers in the distance. It'd already been sparking from the gunfire, and those few extra bullets did it in. One less protective little bastard to worry about. I lowered my weapon then and turned to face Diaz. "Captain, we need to get your Marines organized so they can provide a solid defense. They're not going to survive the fight if they're scattered everywhere."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get on it."

"No. You stay here with your men. Encourage their efforts and keep 'em going. I'll handle the rest."

He nodded curtly before gripping his assault rifle tight and dropping down behind the wall with a squad. For now, until the enemy got

closer, all they could really do was keep the Crawlers at bay. As for long-distance coverage, I had an idea. I keyed the COM through my earpiece to the whole outpost.

"Marines of Xavier, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper! If you're a sharpshooter or have been trained to do so, meet at this location now. The outpost is under attack!"

Next I switched the filter to the men and women close by. "We need an MG set up on the right corner! Those Crawlers are coming in fast and there's not too many of us, so we need all the firepower we can get. Go!"

Slowly, the tired and dirty Marines of Outpost Xavier got into motion - and not just mechanically, but moving with some gusto. They had clear-cut instructions on what to do now, not just something as simple and general as manning their post or squeezing off a round at the enemy. Sometimes, that was all it took to get the blood flowing after weeks and weeks of getting hammered and taking it.

Finally I turned back to the skirmish myself, hunkering down beside Staff Sergeant Lynch behind the low wall and aiming down the sights at the next group of Watchers. I realized then that we needed to start thinning out the number of Knights on approach as well, and for that I fired off one last burst at a sentinel and reached for my web belt.

"Frag out!" I shouted, priming the grenade in my hand before standing tall and throwing it out in an arch. It flew above the squad of Marines below and into the fast-incoming group of Knights and their hovering security bots, bursting almost as soon as it hit the rocky ground. A Watcher and a Knight vanished into sparking metal parts and an imploding flash of orange light, while another nearby Knight made a sound that closely resembled a wail at having been hit. Before it could do much damage I quickly pulled up my rifle again and squeezed the trigger, sending a trio of bursts in its direction to finally finish it off. Three more down.

"Keep up the fire, Marines!" I yelled, moving my scope to the next target. "Get into position and let's fight them off! We can stop them!"

The men and women around me increased their tempo, firing shot after shot after shot, but there were many Prometheans charging the lines and too few of us. Knights were starting to teleport in closer and brandishing their purple blades, seemingly made of light but I knew from experience that they were as real and solid as any sword - and just as deadly. While a fireteam of Marines on my flank finally started setting up a fifty cal to help, I yelled out, "Watch the blades! Tag those bastards before they get close!"

Pulses of orange light filled the area, hitting the low wall right in front of us now and forcing most of us to duck as a steady stream of suppressive fire ravaged our defense. An EMP grenade was thrown into the mix as well, but since I didn't have my helmet on at the moment, I didn't have to endure its disorienting effects while the electronics temporarily shut down and booted back up. While the Marines around me were stunned, I popped back up and fired off several bursts, finishing out my mag before taking cover once more to replace it.

"Where the hell is that MG! Get it up now!"

"They're working on it, Colonel!" Captain Diaz replied from below.

"Sharpshooters?"

"Moving into position!"

Finally, just as the Prometheans were getting way too close for comfort, the proverbial cavalry arrived. Marines started fighting in sync with one another and the large-caliber machine gun opened up, immediately freeing our perimeter of enemy forces who'd managed to get through. A handful of Knights and most of the Crawlers were just blasted, getting torn up by the heavy rate of fire of the MG. Those behind began lagging as well once the sharpshooters started in from our six, forcing sharp cracks through the air as they took down their targets further out. After much effort, this was starting to look like the defense it should've been from the get-go.

The sudden onslaught was too much now for the Promethean AI-bots to overcome; it was strange sometimes just how quickly things could turn around in combat. Though there weren't many of us we were making good use of our resources and working together now, and for this fight that made all the difference.

"Excellent work, Marines! Force them out!"

I hunkered down with another fresh magazine and fired off burst after burst at the remaining Crawlers on the rough desert floor - the few Knights left had cut their losses and already teleported out, taking most of the Watchers with them. Those caught in the crossfire weren't so lucky, though, and ended up smoking pieces of wreckage against the rocks.

When it was all over a few minutes later, I found myself letting out a sigh of relief as sweat dotted my forehead. The whole skirmish hadn't taken much more than fifteen minutes, but it felt like hours had gone by.

And it was then that I realized just how fast my heart was pounding in my chest. I shut my eyes tight and waited a moment for my pulse to steady before opening them again. When I glanced up, I saw Captain Diaz staring down at me with the beginnings of a grin on his face.

"Could've used you here all along, Colonel," he said to me. "That was a sight to see."

I snorted as I stood. "You might want to wait a while to take a victory lap. That effort started off slow and sloppy. Your Marines need to get better or we won't make it out here." I gave him a pointed look. "I'll help of course, but you're closer to them. I need you to carry it out and make sure things are done right."

"Yes, ma'am. What can I do?"

"We'll get you the extra men and supplies, but you have to put them to good use." I looked around at the signs of the skirmish - the torn

up terrain and fast-degrading outer wall. "One of my battalions in the 52nd Regiment are engineers. I'll have some of them work on fixing this wall first, make it stronger so it provides us with better protection. They'll get on it as soon as they arrive, along with setting up additional barracks space for everyone who's just gotten here."

"Okay. What else?"

"You can't depend only on the Marines you've got stationed on the wall when a fight like that breaks out," I answered. "You need to get anyone who can help out here right away - anyone who's got the chops you need at the time. With how bare bones things are right now, you can't afford not to use everything you have." I gestured to the corners where there was obvious need of permanently posted gunners. "We've got extra MGs in the supply crates we brought. I'll send you a map later of where I want those set up, and I want Marines on them twenty-four-seven. Understood?"

He nodded. "Got it, Colonel."

"You figure out the rotations, but we can't just leave ourselves open to attack." I motioned for him to walk with me then and he followed, along with Staff Sergeant Lynch and the rest of my team. When we got closer to the inner quad, I pointed out the high cliffs at our back. "We're actually not in a bad spot here from a defensive perspective, Diaz. You just need to know how to use that to your advantage. We've got cliffs on our six and our left and right flank. That makes it hard to be attacked from the sides, or from behind, but leaves us open in the middle. That's a perfect place to bolster up a barricade and make an observation post to alert the rest of us of incoming enemy forces."

The captain started to reply, but I cut him off.

"And those cliffs aren't just natural walls to help protect the outpost. I want each of your sharpshooters posted up there at all times - again on a rotating basis. However you see fit, but we shouldn't let all of this terrain go to waste." I met his gaze then. "What do you have in the way of explosives?"

He shrugged and scratched at his head in embarrassment. "I'm not too sure actually, ma'am. Major Rosa was in charge of that, and when I took over...well, I had other things on my mind. It was all a lot to digest at once."

"All right. Well, if you're out, we've got some crates of those, too. We'll get a demo team to start setting them up on all sectors of approach. That should do it for today. It'll be a good start."

Captain Diaz raised an eyebrow at me. "A good start, ma'am?"

I nodded as I slung my rifle behind my back once more and stooped to pick up my helmet where I'd left it. "Yes, Captain. It takes a lot more than a Marine with a gun and orders to fire at the enemy to keep up a viable outpost. You'll learn that now that we're here if you haven't already."

\* \* \*



><p>It didn't take long after that for the remainder of the 52nd Regiment to begin trickling in from the LZ. I opened private COM channels to each of my battalion commanders, informing them of the situation and issuing orders on what I wanted them to work on right away. After that I had my XO, Major Brewer, meet with me and Captain Diaz in the command tent for a briefing.<p>

As we stood around the holo map of the area, I let out a sigh. "So here's where we're at, and all of this - " I said, indicating the encroaching sphere of red surrounding us, " - is where the enemy has been known to come from. As you can see, we're pretty well covered on all sides. So besides beefing up security internally here at the outpost, I want more roving patrols deployed now that we've got the manpower. I've already spoken to Diaz about setting up a forward observation post, too. Anything you can see that you'd like to add?"

Brewer shook her head. "Not that I can tell right now, Colonel. My only concern is all that red. It's going to be hard to get the scientists safely in and out to explore the area if we're on the defensive all the time."

I nodded. "Right. We'll eventually have to push outward and form a larger perimeter to give them some space to work, but that's a ways off for now. First things first. We need the outpost truly up and running - and safe - before we send out the scientists."

Captain Diaz frowned. "Scientists? You brought civvies in with you guys?"

"That's affirmative," Major Brewer responded. "You didn't hear? The UNSC wants us to start turning Requiem into a research station. Once the Storm and Prometheans are sufficiently out of the way, we let the brains loose out here and cover them. See what kind of info they can turn up on our new friends."

Diaz snorted. "Jesus. What the hell do they think is out here? We've barely been hanging on ourselves lately, let alone trying to protect a group of smartasses who don't know how to use a gun."

"Watch it," I warned, flashing him a sharp look.

"Apologies, ma'am. I just think this is ridiculous."

"Ridiculous or no, they're our orders," I said firmly. "And they're not so far-fetched now that we're here. Once the outpost is in decent shape we'll have a good chance of going on the offensive at times, too, and not just fighting to stay alive."

"It won't be that easy, Colonel, even with the extra troops. This morning was just a taste of what we normally deal with."

"I'm aware of that. And I said we'll get it done." I glanced at my XO again. "Anything else, Dani?"

"No, ma'am."

"All right. Diaz, I've got some more tasks for you once the work gets underway in here."

"Ma'am?"

"When the engineers are finished we'll have several new amenities up and running. We'll get a mess tent, improved and expanded barracks, a much better outer wall, and rudimentary showers. I want you to make sure all your men are cleaned, shaved, fed, and rested while my battalions watch the lines. You'd be surprised how much the simplest things can boost morale out in the field - and what a major difference that will make in their performance."

"Understood, Colonel."

"We'll show them that they're not beaten yet. This operation can still be salvaged. And we don't have to bow to the enemy anymore."

\* \* \*

><p>What I wanted to do after a long afternoon of overseeing the improvements I'd ordered done was curl up on a cot and sleep. I was exhausted from the time difference and the trip, and being constantly on alert for sounds as I'd been told the outpost was routinely hit more than once in a day. But there was still much to be done, and evening was slowly approaching on this side of Requiem. I ended up returning to the command tent instead, where I found Major Brewer studying the holo map again.<p>

"If you're looking for easy answers, they don't magically pop up from the geography, unfortunately."

The major chuckled. "I kind of figured. This place is in pretty terrible shape, huh?"

"Yeah. They've had some setbacks and a lot of bad luck. I'm hoping we can turn that around now that we're here."

"Did doing a walk-around outside help?"

I ran a hand across my face, wishing the mess was up already so I could get some coffee. "A little. We didn't get all the way around because the Prometheans attacked. We should probably go do that before the sun goes down."

"I'll go find Diaz."

Realizing there wasn't much I could do from inside the tent, I stepped out and followed her...until I saw him in the distance.

Apparently Brewer did as well, since I saw her suddenly grin. "Well, ma'am, we certainly don't have a shortage of good-looking spooks. My husband being one of them."

Frozen in place for the moment, it took me a while to reply. "His colleague is charming and very attractive, but he's a snake. I don't trust him."

My XO whipped around. "You know him?"

"Sadly, yes."

I left it at that and walked past her. I deliberately went the long way around to avoid running into Ethan again, but somehow he managed to zero in on us and moved to approach - despite the fact that I'd explicitly told him I never wanted him near me again.

He flashed me a smile as he sidled up, and I felt my stomach turn.

"Colonel. Feeling better now that you've got all that off your chest?"

Before he could get any closer, I pulled my battle rifle off my back and aimed it right at his torso. His eyebrows shot up in surprise and he stopped dead in his tracks, while beside me, Brewer gave me an startled look.

"Back. Off," I said in a tight voice. "I meant what I said, Ethan. You don't get to come see me and you don't get to talk to me. Turn right around and leave."

Ethan appeared to recover from the shock and his grin widened. Then he started laughing, his hands held up in surrender.

"That's a tad overreactive, Cooper, don't you think?" He flicked his gaze toward Brewer. "I'm here to speak to the major, if you don't mind, since getting a sitrep from you is clearly out of the question."

"But I don't think it's been made clear enough quite yet," I replied, still holding my gun to bear. "You talk to her when I'm gone, Commander. Not in my presence. You do your job and I'll do mine, but we do it far away from each other. Understand?"

Doing something sensible for once, Ethan took a step back, hands still up in the air. "All right. I got it."

"All right, what?"

"All right, ma'am." He looked to Brewer again. "Major, I need to speak with you when you're done with the lieutenant colonel. It appears she's in a bad mood today."

He gave me one last look before he lowered his hands, turned, and walked off. I brought my weapon down after another few seconds and found my second-in-command just staring at me. I slung my battle rifle behind my back, trying not to look sheepish.

"There's got to be a story in there somewhere," she said to me.

I released a sigh and decided to come clean - at least about a fragment of it.

"He's my ex," I answered simply.

## 20. Chapter 19: Trouble on the Horizon

**\*\*Chapter Nineteen: Trouble on the Horizon\*\***

**\*\*0735 Hours, July 24, 2558. Forerunner Shield World Surface, Requiem. "The Revelation," Epiloch System. Day Five of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

It took a few days for things to start turning around at Outpost Xavier. Both my engineers and other Marines were hard at work with various tasks while the original inhabitants of the outpost rested, and within a short span of time we had a new mess tent, an improved series of barracks underway, and a much better perimeter defense set up. We were still waiting on the showers, though, but I knew that would come by the end of the week â€" and now no longer exhausted and continuously on the lines, the original contingent looked to be doing well enough to wait.

For my part, I took advantage of my command quarters and stayed in a moment longer this morning, using the COM console I was supposed to use as a link to my higher-ups on Earth for something not-so-authorized â€" contacting my family for the first time since our arrival. I waited impatiently for the connection to go through, and then smiled slightly as my husband's tired voice came over the unit.

"Hello?"

"Hi, honey. It's me," I said.

I could hear the grin in his voice when he replied. "Hey, Cooper. It's good to hear from you. I'm guessing you guys made it safe?"

"We did, just a few days ago. I'm sorry I didn't try calling you sooner. It's kind of a mess out here and we're just starting to get organized."

"It's all right." He sighed on the other end, sounding more alert now. "You're probably still not allowed to tell me where you are, huh?"

I shook my head out of reflex, although the call was audio only. "Nope. I'm sorry about that, too. But we're alive and okay for now. There's just a lot of work to be done, and not much time. We get attacked on a regular basis and it tends to stall whatever we're trying to accomplish at the moment."

"I get it. No hope of you getting back early then."

"We'll see. Maybe our sprucing up around here'll do the trick." I swallowed suddenly, unable to put it off anymore. I really needed someone to talk to about it, and I wanted it to be him. "Listen, Will, there's something about the mission I need to - "

I stopped mid-sentence when I heard a commotion on the other end, then my husband came back on the line.

"Shit. Coop, I know you might not get another chance to call for a while and I'm glad you did. I'll let the kids know you're doing okay. But Collins just called me back into her office for something urgent. I need to be there in ten minutes."

I didn't know what to say in response to the abrupt interruption, so all I replied was, "All right."

"I love you very much, Natalie. Please be safe."

"I will. I love you, too."

Shortly after that I found myself sitting disappointed on my bunk, wishing we'd had longer to talk and that I could have finished telling him about Ethan â€" that he was somehow still alive and here with me. I very much wanted Willis to be the one in his place, but the cosmos didn't work that way. I was instead stuck with a man I would have rather had remained dead, while the one I loved was light-years away, busy at home with the family I missed so much it hurt.

\* \* \*

><p>In an effort to keep my mind off home as much as possible, I set out to make the rounds of the outpost after I'd taken my meds for the nightmares and dressed. Thankfully avoiding any run-ins with Ethan today, I checked in with my battalion commanders on their progress, met with Major Brewer about the defensive operations going on in and around Xavier, and once that was complete I thought I'd check in with the wounded in the medical tent.<p>

Almost a week since our arrival, the badly injured Major Hillary Rosa was reportedly still clinging to life. I wished there were some way for me to facilitate her recovery, but the best I could do was pay a visit to her and the other Marines who'd suffered nasty hits while stationed in the hot desert on a remote world.

Even though I had my jacket sleeves rolled up again and held my helmet in hand, I found myself perspiring from the heat by the time I made it to the tent. Corpsman Michael Reynolds was the first to see me enter and he flashed a small grin.

"Colonel Cooper. Good to see you in here without being one of my patients for once."

I snorted. "Don't jinx it, Doc. We just got dirtside. There's still plenty of time for that."

"I hope not, ma'am. What brings you in?"

"Just taking a quick tour and thought I'd stop in to see how things were going. Any changes for Major Rosa yet?"

He quickly shook his head. "No, ma'am. She's still fighting, but to be honest, I'm not sure she'll make it. Round to the throat like thatâ€"it'll be tough."

"Well, all we can do is hope she'll somehow come back around, right?" I folded my arms across my chest and sighed. "My husband did on Khan, when everyone was telling me to expect the worst. I couldn't accept it, and he battled hard and made it back."

"Yes, ma'am. Miracles happen every day." His grin suddenly returned. "\_You're\_ still here after all the close calls you've had over the years, aren't you?"

"TouchÃ". "

He turned then and indicated the fallen major's room number with his hand. "Straight that way to the right, Colonel. Although you should be forewarned, she has already has a visitor."

"Who?"

"Captain Diaz. I get the feeling they're more familiar with each other than a CO-XO pair normally are."

He said that last with a hint of disapproval and I wondered why. It was true that Diaz and Rosa were different ranks, as well as within the same direct chain of command — both no-nos according to the regs. But they were also both officers, and close enough in rank that their personal relationship could be ignored so long as it didn't create a problem. Reynolds's judgment about something fairly slight was not a usual trait of his, and that made me curious.

"I got that feeling the other day, too," I finally said. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"No problem, ma'am."

When I reached the room, I saw Captain Diaz sitting beside the major's bed, holding her left hand in both of his and hunched over, as if in prayer. He stopped his whispering and barely noticeable rocking back and forth when I came in and started.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper, ma'am," he said, making to stand but I gestured at him to stay put. It was clear he was torn for a moment between wanting to hang onto Rosa's hand and knowing he shouldn't in front of me. Finally he let go and placed it beside her leg on the cot, and it was my turn to be a bit surprised. Major Rosa's ring finger had a wedding band on it.

"She's married," I said, realizing I was stating the obvious but unable to stop the words. The wounded Marine officer's face was very pale from blood loss, and she had long curly black hair that cascaded down to her shoulders, almost getting caught in all the tubes and wires going into her arm, her respirator, and her throat. She looked to be in as bad a shape as I'd been told. And yet that was the detail I focused on. "But not to you."

To his credit, Captain Tanner Diaz didn't shy away from the truth. "No, ma'am. She told me her husband's back on Hammond in the Outer Colonies, where his family's from, waiting for her to come home. I'm pretty sure he doesn't know about us." His face turned red. "We didn't — mean for it to happen. It just sort of evolved, I guess. We'd been out here for so long together facing dire straights, thinking we were going to die any day and it — got serious."

"So you had an affair."

"Yes."

I took in a deep breath and said, "You were honest with me, Diaz, so I'm going to be honest with you. Knowing that puts me in a precarious position. Military law is very clear on extramarital affairs between the ranks; you know I can't let this slide, like I would've if you were both single."

For the first time, Captain Diaz hung his head low. "I know, Colonel."

"I know what it's like to be away from your spouse for months â€" hell, for years â€" at a time. I know what kinds of emotions you go through when you're on the lines for that long and constantly see things headed south. But that's not an excuse."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you married, too, Captain?"

"No, ma'am."

"Does she have kids?"

"No, ma'am."

Not that that made it any easier on Rosa's husband, who'd soon find his wife had been unfaithful on top of her likely death. But at least there weren't children or another spouse in the mix to make the heartbreak and betrayal even worse.

Still, seeing the former acting outpost commander lying in bloodied fatigues on the cot before me with nothing but the tubes keeping her alive for now was enough for me to make my next words gentle ones, even if the message wasn't.

"You know what's going to happen now, Diaz. I told you before that I can't just turn a blind eye to this. If she wakes up, you'll both receive a reprimand, and one of you is getting transferred to a separate outpost immediately. If she doesn't, the black mark on your record goes to you. Either way, it ends here."

"Yes, ma'am."

I left then, not wanting to involve myself further in the matter.

During the War Willis and I had spent almost two and a half years apart, shortly after getting married on Graduation Day at the Naval Academy. I'd had a terrible first campaign where I'd seen plenty of blood and guts and real death, up close and personal, for the first times in my life, and I'd needed to feel things like being cared for and feeling safe and secure again â€" or even to find some temporary escape to forget all that was happening around me, all that I'd witnessed. Two years was a long time to spend apart, especially under the circumstances, but I'd never cheated on Willis â€" and neither had he. The day we'd finally reunited was also the night we conceived our first son, and after that it just felt normal to be away for long stretches of time, even if it hurt.

But my hope had always been in seeing my husband again, and later our son. Never in someone else.

\* \* \*

><p>Oddly enough, I felt much more comfortable an hour later as I geared up along with one of my battalions' company of Marines for a

patrol into known enemy territory than I had in the medtent earlier this morning with Captain Diaz.<p>

Every commander in the Corps accepted the fact that some of the men and women under their command would naturally act on their impulses and attractions from time to time; facing death and the stresses of combat every day made that even more likely. The problems arose when there were vast differences in rank, an inability to remain professional with one another in public, or one or both parties were already legally bound to someone else. It was the latter cases I hated dealing with because I expected more of the people I led. It sounded like the lieutenant colonel who'd been in charge before hadn't instilled personal integrity in his Marines, either, in addition to caring poorly for his post.

But until Major Rosa's fate was determined, there was nothing for me to do about the situation for now except wait. I still hoped she made a full recovery somehow, but if she did, she was in for some serious ramifications for her actions â€" as was Diaz.

For the moment, though, I put all of that on the backburner as I picked up a few extra clips for my weapons from an ammo crate, and glanced around to make sure the others did the same.

"The area's crawling with aliens and AI-bots on all sides, Marines," I said loudly, shoving a last mag into my pants pocket and reaching for a grenade to replace the one I'd used the day we'd landed. I hooked the frag to my web belt carefully and added, "Pack as much heat as you can carry. You never know what we'll run into out there."

I was answered with a chorus of "Yes, ma'am"s and other acknowledgments. Satisfied by the response â€" and the fact that I had everything I needed for the patrol â€" I took a step back to let the company commander handle it while I went and found Major Brewer to let her know I was leaving.

"Dani, I'm going out for a while with your G Company," I said to her. "Make sure you keep a good eye on this place while I'm gone."

"Yes, ma'am," she answered, frowning slightly. "But all due respectâ€|are you sure that's safe?"

I couldn't help but grin a little. "Definitely not safe, no. But I want to see what we're up against out here for myself, and the attacks on the outpost only show me half the picture. I need to know just how bad it is so we can be better prepared."

Slowly the major nodded. "I understand, Colonel. I'll have things under control here until then." She cleared her throat. "You're supposed to have your meeting with the spooks today as well, ma'am. Should I take that over for you?"

"Yeah, go ahead. Although I'm sure you already know Cal's take on things." At least the parts he could tell her, anyway. I knew Caleb would never reveal confidential information to his wife because I knew Cal, and I also knew he kept others' private matters to himself since Brewer had been genuinely ignorant of my connection to Ethan the other day â€" a fact I very much appreciated. Since then, my already high estimation of Lieutenant Lloyd had gone up even more.



I paused before pulling my helmet on. "As for Commander Ackerson's appraisal, you can fill me in on that when I get back."

"Understood, ma'am. Good luck, and semper fi."

"Oorah, Major. We'll try to return quick."

## 21. Chapter 20: Hide and Seek

### \*\*Chapter Twenty: Hide and Seek\*\*

I remained at the center of the formation as we set off behind Captain Leo StangÃ,rd and his Golf Company, surrounded by my security detail on all sides, plus the Marines of G. It was already hot in the desert at mid-morning, so while helmets were a must on the combat patrol, each of the Marines had opted to shed their uniform jackets in favor of strapping their torso armor on directly over the T-shirts they wore underneath. I was no exception, and I found myself quickly starting to sweat through that layer of clothing, too.

I suddenly thought of the late Major Hayden and what he'd said about the weather back on Khan, a while before he was killed â€" it was probably going to be the only place either of us had ever been stationed at that had had comfortable temperatures.

"Coming up on the forward OP now, Colonel," Captain StangÃ,rd said to me over the COM then. "Orders?"

"Send them a confirmation hail, Captain," I responded, holding my battle rifle loosely in my arms across my middle. "We don't want to get off on the wrong foot."

"Yes, ma'am."

This was the first day the observation post I'd ordered placed outside the outpost had been up and running. They weren't used to seeing friendly patrols out yet and were likely jumpy because of the unknown, so I wanted to make sure they were well aware of our presence.

The confirmation took all of fifteen seconds, and with a green flash of light across my HUD indicating that we were all good to go, we continued on into the rocky landscape. I had to admit, there was a certain rugged beauty to Requiem â€" at least what I'd seen of it so far. The knowledge that we were currently caged in on all sides by various enemies, though, made it seem treacherous and foreboding.

"So how long are we going to be out here, Nat?"

I turned and faced my brother-in-law for a moment when he spoke, but quickly returned my attention to our surroundings, just in case. "I'm not sure yet. I guess it depends on what we find. Why? You nervous?"

"Maybe a little."

I smiled slightly. "Good. That'll keep you alive. But don't let the

fear overtake you, Matt; you've fought before and did just fine on Khan. And you're a Marine now, Private."

"I know," he replied with a chuckle. "It's justâ€¦Khan was my home, you know? I felt comfortable there and I knew the city inside and out. Here everything's different. It's all new to me still â€" not just the terrain, but the people I'm with, too."

"Have you been fitting in okay with your squad?"

"Yeah," he answered fast, but didn't sound totally convincing. He seemed to sense it in his voice and amended, "Well, sort of. There's already a rumor going around that I used to be a reb, so I get grilled about that sometimes. A couple of my fireteam members are cool with it after I explained it to them, but othersâ€¦I don't think everyone trusts me."

Glancing down at the dirt, I said, "Well, I can't say I'm surprised by that. The Corps' a tight group and if we feel like anyone's gone against us in the past, it can be very hard to let that person into the club. But I know you, and the fact that you never hurt anyone in your time as a rebel on Khan. You were just trying to find your way in your adopted world, and that seemed like the only choice for you then. In time, they'll start to see that, too."

"I hope so."

"Till then, just be yourself and keep your guard up, okay?"

Matthew nodded. "Right."

Gripping my gun in my left hand, I reached out with my right as we walked and squeezed his shoulder. "Speaking of, you should get back to your squad. They'll need you to have their six in case something breaks out."

"What about you?"

I flipped a thumb to my detail behind me. "Don't worry, I'm covered. You don't have to be scared of facing Will's wrath if I don't make it." I gave him a pointed look. "\_I\_ do if something happens to you, though, so stay sharp."

"Yes, ma'am."

The younger Hawk flashed me a quick grin before jogging up ahead to rejoin his unit. I was stupidly watching his progress when we entered a large, rocky overlook and shots rang out from below.

I brought my weapon to bear in an instant as my security detail formed up tighter around me. Keying the COM, I shouted, "Sitrep!"

Captain StangÃ,rd replied, "We hit the hornet's nest, ma'am! Storm!"

"How many?"

"At least a platoon's worth, Colonel! And they've got support. Two Ghosts and a Wraith!"

"\_Shit.\_" I switched to a general channel and said, "Heavy weapons, you're up, now! I want MGs along the ridgeline and snipers covering their six! The rest of you hold position and open fire if you're up front!"

Much to the dismay of my team, I broke formation then and ran towards the fighting myself, hoping to get up close to see what was going on. Staff Sergeant Derek Lynch was hot on my heels as I ran across the hard, dusty golden plateau, no doubt cursing behind me.

"Colonel, wait for us! The area's hot!" he called.

"I know, Staff! That's why I'm going!"

The sounds of gunfire and incoming plasma rounds grew louder as we rushed through the column. I heard the \_whoosh\_ of an outgoing rocket somewhere on my flank, the steady rattle of the machine guns in front of us, and the occasional sharp \_cracks\_ of the sniper rifles already doing their jobs. Some of the Marines close by with mid- or long-distance guns also opened up, but the rest stood tense and watched, guns held at the ready but not yet in range to do any good.

I got to the ridgeline just as a second rocket streaked through the air below, connecting with one of the Ghosts at the bottom of the half-moon desert floor and exploded, blue sparks and alien parts flying. It was good one was already out of the mix, but up here, that wasn't the vehicle type I was most worried about.

"Heavy weapons, concentrate fire on that Wraith! We don't want it to æ" !"

No sooner had I started to say the words than the large enemy tank set its sights on us. I grabbed hold of the top of the closest Marine's torso armor and pulled him back, making him rise to his feet as he gripped a rocket launcher in his hands to turn and run.

"Mortar incoming!" I yelled out, stumbling back. "Spread out!"

The terrifying \_schwoop\_ from down below signaled that the heavy round was already on its way. I'd thought the extreme angle might be tough for the Wraith to handle, but it seemed the operator was a good one. The huge, glowing blue round burst moments later against the top of the ridge, while some of the MG gunners were still scrambling to get out of the way. I heard their screams as several were consumed in the blast, while an unlucky few fell to their deaths as a sizable chunk of rock broke off the face of the cliff, right out from under the boots of Marines who'd been slower to react.

For my part, I'd leapt towards the ground as soon as I'd sprinted away, Staff Sergeant Lynch following a split second later to crush me to the rock to protect me. I'd groaned at the sudden added weight, but when he finally got off and offered me his hand to help me up once the danger was gone, I felt grateful.

I could tell by the state of my aide's uniform and armor that chunks of debris had rained down on us from the large detonation. Lynch was still brushing them off when I moved past him to assess the damage,

ignoring the stinging pain from various small cuts on my bare arms as I went.

"StangÃ,rd, what's our status?" I barked.

"Half of first squad of first platoon is gone, ma'am," the captain responded. "They weren't able to move in time."

"Dammit." I stepped up and moved forward with the Marines holding rockets, not wanting to place them in harm's way if I wouldn't go myself. "Heavy weapons, we need to get back on it! Aim at that Wraith, now! We need it destroyed! MGs and snipers, hold for now and move back in the second it's gone!"

Acknowledgment lights winked green across my HUD, but in the moment I barely noticed. Instead I crouched beside one of the rocketmen and aimed down the sights of my BR85HB using its scope, spotting targets while they managed the Wraith. I fired off a series of rounds at one of the Elites below, while I heard the Marine to my right let loose another streaking rocket. To my left, a second did the same, as did a third further down the line.

The trio of heavy rounds impacted the Wraith tank one after the other below. I thought it was done for until I saw that the final rocket had just clipped its side, barely missing. I cursed under my breath as the rocketmen ducked to reload, hoping the now-smoking and sparking behemoth didn't still have enough power left to launch another round back at us.

Unfortunately, it did.

\_Schwoop!\_

"Marines,\_ move!\_"

This time it was Staff Sergeant Lynch who yanked \_my\_ armor from behind, forcing me backwards before anyone else had even had time to get to their feet. Our luck seemed to be getting better, though, because the big mortar round ended up falling short; we never saw it come up against the ridgeline, but I felt the quake beneath my boots as it hit the cliff face several meters beneath it.

"It missed!" I cried. "Get those rockets in the tube \_now\_ and take it out!"

One of the Marines who'd been next to me earlier sprung up to be the first to the ridgeline, holding his heavy weapon at the ready. A second later he suddenly pitched forward off the cliff with a muted sound â€" and a messy spray of blood â€" as a sniper round from the Storm went straight through his helmeted head.

Now decorated with splotches of bright red on my fatigues, I stopped short before shouting, "Enemy sharpshooters below! Be cautious and make it quick!"

I dropped to my stomach beside the heavy weapons crew then, inching forward to the edge of the ridge to keep from becoming the next victim. I needed to see where the fire was coming from to try to keep the rocketmen safe. Zooming in with the scope, I spotted a faint glint Willis had taught me to look for when I'd learned

counter-sniper tactics at the Naval Academy. Though my scope wasn't powerful enough to get me a clear picture from this far away, I fired off a blind pair of bursts, hoping something hit â€" even if only to keep the Jackals' heads down until I could move in our own snipers to dispatch them.

Meanwhile, I heard two more rockets get released next to me while I did my best to keep the sharpshooters busy. As the heavy weapons crew moved back again to keep out of the way, I fired off one last burst before turning to watch the rockets' trajectory. Both burst right on top of the smoking Wraith tank at once, forcing it into a half a dozen large pieces of burning scrap metal around a hulking ruin.

\_Yes,\_ I thought, pounding the side of my fist on the ground. I quickly picked up my battle rifle and crawled back from the edge. "Nice work, Marines! Now let's tag the rest! MGs and snipers, you're up! Let's take out their long-distance shots and chew up their remaining defenses! Heavy weapons, get rid of that last Ghost! Then we move in!"

\* \* \*

><p>After the skirmish I stood on the desert floor with my security detail, walking around with the rest of the Marines to take care of the stragglers, and see if we could find any intel on the Storm's presence in the area â€" like what their total numbers might be, and whether or not they had a permanent outpost of their own somewhere near ours that they were coming from. Judging by their numbers here, I figured this might've been a bigger version of a forward OP for them.<p>

Captain StangÃ,rd came up beside me just as I was firing off a round from my sidearm into a dying Jackal's head. The creature had a blood-smeared beam rifle beside it, even before I put a hole in its cranium; he'd been one of the snipers that had killed nearly a squad of my men on the ridge.

"Colonel, that's the last of them. What did you want us to do now?"

I holstered my pistol and slung my rifle behind my back, which I'd been holding onto with my other hand. I wished I could wipe the sweat from my forehead, but even with the immediate threat eliminated, I knew this was still no place for me to pull off my helmet just yet. "Form a perimeter and keep a sharp eye on that ridge, StangÃ,rd. We can get ambushed from up there just as easily as the Storm did, and we don't have the benefit of vehicles and armor to help us."

"Yes, ma'am."

"After that we sweep this location. I want to know what the Storm were camped here for."

"Right away, Colonel."

The captain made himself scarce then as he went to carry out my orders. In the meantime, I started to look around myself, my detail in tow. We walked around the still-smoking but extinguished ruins of the Wraith tank, and one of the Ghosts not far beyond. I glanced up

at a few of the purple structures set up down here, too, where the Remnant troops had mounted a few of their own plasma guns on the circular platforms on top. A dead Grunt was slumped over one, its sky-blue blood spilled and now drying on its MG.

"War isn't pretty, is it?"

I turned at the sound of the voice and felt a spike of anger go through me. "What the hell are you doing here? Do you have some kind of hearing impairment or a death wish or something?"

I wished my team had been warned against allowing Ethan Ackerson to approach me. But being technically considered a "friendly", he'd slipped right in in his black ONI fatigues and stood close by now, arms folded across his chest as he quietly observed what I did.

He scoffed at my rebuff. "I'm one of two Intelligence operatives on this mission, Colonel. I have a right to come along on a patrol if I feel I can gather useful intel from it."

"You were supposed to stay at the outpost," I snapped back. "You know I don't want you here."

"The UNSC cares little what you want, Cooper. I felt it was time for me to see firsthand what was out here, just like you."

It was my turn to snort this time. "Right. So why weren't you along for any of the combat patrols before now? You only decide 'it's time' to come when it's me?" Though he'd actually kept a respectable distance from me as he spoke, I broke that now and got closer, jabbing a finger in his direction. "Don't forget that I'm the one in charge of the outpost and this operation now, Ethan. I can send you packing so fast â€" "

"I'm also here because of the kid."

"What?"

Ethan turned to look at me then. "PFC Matthew Hawk. Your husband's brother, right? I know he used to be a rebel in the not-so-distant past, so I want to make sure he's legitimate."

At that I bristled. "And why wouldn't he be? It's not like there's rebs for him to consort with out here anyway. And I doubt he'd want to fuck things up for us light-years from home because I'm sure he doesn't want to die on this shield planet." It was only then that a lightbulb went on in my head. "This is because you still have some kind of grudge against Willis, isn't it? Going after his brother because you can't go after him? Because he deigned to treat me with dignity and respect all those years ago, unlike you?"

My ex didn't take the bait. Instead he turned away again and replied in an even tone, "Think what you want, Natalie. That's in the past."

"Is it really? You still haven't told me yet how it is you're alive. I saw your dead body in Lienz, Ethan, transformed into a Flood form with your dogtags hanging off it. And yet you're here, clearly alive and well and just as much of a sick bastard as you used to be. Care to explain that?"

Our gazes met and I felt a subtle shift between us, though I couldn't figure out what it was just yet.

"It's ONI, Natalie," Ethan said matter-of-factly. "Don't believe everything you see."

## 22. Chapter 21: Not Indifferent

### \*\*Chapter Twenty-One: Not Indifferent\*\*

It didn't escape my notice that Ethan had once again dodged the answer to my question, but for now we had more important things on our plate to deal with. I consulted with Captain StangÃ,rd on the route we were to continue taking on the remainder of the patrol, going to the edge of the rugged desert area and along the natural boundary of the treeline, where more of a jungle-like terrain began. Taking a look at the map on my datapad, I designated that as 'Sector A' and marked the jungle, as of yet unmapped, as 'Sector B', to be explored later. I also placed an 'X' on the area we'd just cleared, where the pocket of Storm had been, for the scientists to investigate later. After taking a look around we were still unsure what purpose the Remnant's presence there had served, but Ethan said he'd bring the findings back to Lieutenant Lloyd once we returned to the outpost and see if they couldn't piece it together. I nodded at that but didn't answer him directly.

"Okay," I said then, putting my datapad back in my pocket and hefting my weapon instead. "Looks like it's time to get this show back on the road."

We hadn't been marching long when we came on a scene I hadn't witnessed for quite some time â€" aliens wiped out by aliens. Just beyond the next overlook there was a whole bloody battlefield below, the signs of the fight everywhere but so far, totally devoid of life. I raised my BR85HB anyway and swept the barrel from side to side and even up above, checking for any stragglers or snipersâ€|or clues that would tell me this was an ambush.

Staff Sergeant Derek Lynch approached quickly behind me. "Ma'am, I respectfully suggest you send a scouting team ahead of you before you go in. We don't know what happened here, and it could still be hot."

"Of course, Staff." I lowered my gun and hit the COM. "Second platoon, you're up. Move up slow and keep your eyes peeled on all sectors. Even if the place looks dead, that doesn't mean it is."

Acknowledgement lights winked green and I crouched by a rocky alcove, surrounded by my security detail, as the platoon of Marines moved forward. A few meters away I saw Captain StangÃ,rd watching their progress, looking just as tense as I felt.

Several minutes passed before we got the all-clear, and I finally felt the breath reenter my lungs. Staff Sergeant Lynch moved up first, while the rest of his team and I followed.

"Jesus, Colonel. Get a load of this," my aide murmured as we walked.

"The Prometheans slaughtered our favorite extraterrestrial buddies out here."

I snorted as I stepped over the dented and torn-apart wreckage of a Crawler, itself lying beside a Jackal with its guts spilled out on the ground. I wrinkled my nose at the stench. "Or the other way around. Looks like they massacred each other. Cuts down on our work, though, I guess."

"You'll want to tag this area for the scientists, ma'am," a familiar and unwelcome voice said beside us then. "There's a lot of leftover Promethean weapons and parts here they can take a look at. Still no Knights though, unfortunately; only their guns."

I turned and saw Ethan pressing a hand to the side of his helmet as he focused his gaze on the bodies, no doubt taking photos of the carnage or recording video clips of what had occurred. He seemed to have a knack for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time and I scowled. "Don't tell me how to do my job, Commander. Believe it or not, I didn't get this far just because my father had a lot of pull with the brass."

Ethan snorted at the jab, not taking his attention off his work. "It was just a suggestion, Cooper. Like the one your aide offered a minute ago. Try not to take offense at everything I say."

"Hard to do when my last memory of you was your sly fucking face in the courtroom when you got the \_shortest\_ sentence possible for -"

I stopped when Staff Sergeant Lynch bumped my shoulder. "Colonel, we might have trouble."

A lone Watcher was hovering around nearby, strangely not firing on us yet. I hadn't seen one without another before, nor without one of the Knights they were typically programmed to keep an eye on. It was further out and seemed to be scouring for something, but we didn't get to find out what. Ethan lifted his rifle without a word and shot it down in two precise bursts from his DMR. When it was sparking on the ground, he turned to me.

"Contrary to popular belief, not all of my skills are thanks to my father," he said.

\* \* \*

><p>We remained at the site just long enough for Ethan to finish collecting what he needed. By then the utter quiet was getting to me, and I still wondered what the Watcher he'd shot down had really been doing. Looking for its charge? Searching for an essential piece of equipment? Scouting ahead?<p>

From what we'd seen so far, there seemed to be so much activity on Requiem from various factions that the answer was nearly limitless.

"Spook looks done, Colonel," Captain Stangård said to me over the COM then. "Should I give the order to move on?"

I nodded in my helmet out of reflex. "Go ahead, Captain. Let's head



back to the outpost. I think we've seen enough for today."

"Yes, ma'am."

The company of Marines had just begun their exit when I felt something hot sizzle past my shoulder. I ducked behind the cover of a large, jagged boulder fast, along with half of my security detail.

"Lynch, where's that fire coming from?" I yelled into the radio.

"More Storm, ma'am! They're on approach!"

\_Great,\_ I thought, and hunkered down to prepare for the fight. "Marines, we've got Remnant troops on the way! Take cover and return fire!"

The group we ran into this time was larger but without the added cavalry, making me think we'd just been two unlucky patrols that had run into each other, despite the fact that there was clear evidence the Storm had had some sort of stake around here to fight the Prometheans over it. All of that was a secondary consideration though as protecting myself and my Marines came first.

Staff Sergeant Lynch rushed over a moment later, propping up his SAW against the rock and letting loose a long rattle as the enemy came into range. A whole line of Grunts fell against the onslaught, the stream of bullets ripping their bodies apart and splattering blood onto the landscape. More moved in behind them though, as did the remainder of the unit.

"Grenade out!" I heard a voice to our flank call out, and I turned to see Matthew running up, gripping his MA5D in one hand and a primed frag in the other. He let the explosive fly in the middle of a hail of lead and plasma and needle fire, then spun on his heel to get back into cover. I watched him out of the corner of my eye as I squeezed the trigger of my own gun, tagging two Jackals in the head and dropping them before they could get further ahead, when I saw my young brother-in-law trip over a smaller rock on the ground he hadn't seen.

"Matt!"

I jumped to my feet without a second thought, my heart pounding hard in my chest as I saw him go down in the crossfire. Lying on the ground like that I knew he'd be targeted in an instant and killed. So I sprinted over to drag him out.

Holding my battle rifle tight against my shoulder, I fired off three quick bursts as I ran, more to keep the oncoming Storm troops' heads down than anything else. Behind me I heard my aide cursing like crazy at my leaping out of cover, but he stayed put and provided suppressive fire while I got to Matt.

"Get up!" I shouted at him, pulling on his body armor. "We have to move!"

"I don't â€" "

"\_Now!\_"

I half hauled him up before he started moving himself and ran off again when I gave him a hard shove in the direction of a boulder. He paused just long enough to squeeze off a long burst at the Remnant, then ducked behind the big rock as more enemy fire came our way. In the meantime I rushed for cover again myself, sprinting just ahead and below the incoming rounds, feeling the hot pulses whizz past me. A handful of needler rounds and carbine fire followed me, and I even heard " and saw " a long-distance shot flash in front of me. I was being painted all right. I ran faster.

I was already ducking low behind the same boulder as Matthew when the last couple of needle rounds traced me around the bend. Three of them burst against the side of the rock, sending a fine dust through the air. The other two didn't.

When they pierced my armor I let out a loud groan, stumbling behind cover and nearly falling to impale myself even further. Thankfully I caught myself in time, but by then I knew I was dead anyway. As soon as the crystalline spikes burst inside me, I was toast.

"No, no, no!"

Matthew was crouched beside me in less than a second, gripping my shoulders as I dropped on all fours on the ground, my vision going in and out, but there was nothing he could do.

"Backâ€|up," I tried to croak, not wanting him to be so close to the exploding shards, but I couldn't seem to get the words out through the thick liquid in my mouth. Blood mixed with saliva, I realized.

I started to wheeze and my brother-in-law sat me back against the rock with the spikes still in me, hoping the change in position would help me breathe better. It did a little bit, but mostly it was the fluid keeping me from breathing well. With effort I gestured vaguely to my neck, and somehow he seemed to get it and pulled off my helmet. I looked into his panicked face for the first time without the obstruction of my HUD or visor " though my plain sight itself wasn't so sharp right now, either.

"Natalie! Oh, holy shit!"

It was only then that I realized the spikes in me should have burst a while ago. I wondered fleetingly why they hadn't and what was taking so long, but then my respiratory issues took sudden priority over my thoughts. I started coughing and finally choked out blood, struggling for air.

"Medic! We need a medic!" Matthew shouted next to me. "The colonel's been hit!"

I wasn't sure what happened next because I lost consciousness.

\* \* \*

><p>My first breath of oxygen wasn't labored like it'd been before, and it took me just a few short seconds for my brain to register that I was on a respirator. It was a while before my next breath came though, so it wasn't automated. It was manual.<p>

"Ma'am, hang on! We'll get you to the medtent just as fast as we can!"

Staff Sergeant Lynch was the speaker. Him and another Marine were carrying me in a litter up a slope, presumably heading back toward Outpost Xavier. The other uniformed woman next to me, ventilating the bag in her hand that was linked to the respirator on my face, was G Company's medic.

"Be careful! We need to be quick but don't rattle the litter too much! Those shards might still burst!"

Shards? Burst? I glanced down at myself slowly, seeing the translucent pink needler rounds still stuck high in my gut. So they weren't out yet. At least they hadn't exploded.

"Christ, Doc, why didn't you take them out?" the second Marine who was helping to carry me said. Matt.

The medic made a sound like he was stupid. "Because she'd bleed out as soon as I pull 'em, Private. But you'd like that, wouldn't you, reb?"

"She's married to my brother! Of course I wouldn't! And I'm not â€"

I took what little energy I had and lifted my hand up a pinch, grabbing hold of the medic's arm. "Matthewâ€|alone," I rasped. \_Leave him alone.\_

The medic's eyes went wide but she quickly nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Sorry. We're almost there; hang on."

Things got dark and fuzzy again, and I didn't come around until I felt myself being dropped hard onto a table.

"Watch it!" I heard Doc Reynolds's voice shout. "The fact that those things haven't exploded yet is extremely lucky. We don't want to handle her too roughly or they could burst."

"So what now? How do we get them out without her losing all her blood or them just fragmenting in there?" G Company's medic.

"We'll have to be delicate," Reynolds responded, clearly shaken and a little on edge but determined. "And have the biofoam and some bandages and gauze ready. Give me the tongs."

"Tongs? Won't the metal be too strong? What if we used our hands?"

"If we apply too much force her organs will get shredded by the blast, so be very gentle. And no hands. Those wouldn't be \_enough\_ force to get them out."

I heard them both put on a pair of exam gloves, then saw their shapes move above me as they got to work. Thankfully I was out again after that, because that wasn't something I wanted to feel.

\* \* \*

><p>I awoke what felt like a long time later in a cot inside the medical tent, a sharp pain rising steadily in my side. I reached for it instinctively before I even opened my eyes and groaned.<p>

"Easy, Colonel. You took quite a hit on that patrol today so just lay back."

My eyes fluttered open finally and I saw Doc Reynolds staring at me.  
"Doc?"

"Yes, ma'am. I hope you know how lucky you are, because had you been anyone else you might not've made it. How much do you remember?"

"Mattâ€|tripped. Went toâ€|help. Spikes in myâ€|stomach."

Reynolds smiled weakly. "That's the gist of it. You'll notice you're not housing a mini-monument just beneath your ribcage anymore. We got 'em out without them bursting, so no harm done."

"R-really?"

He frowned. "Well, you'll be sore for a while, and we loaded you up with biofoam and saline solution to replenish the blood you lost â€" and keep what you still had in there in. The other IV's the painkiller. I know you hate this part, but you're going to have to take it easy for a few days."

I wanted to snort but I couldn't bring myself to make the motion just yet. "Should'veâ€|kept your mouth shut, Michael."

"Huh?"

A corner of my lips twitched. "Told you youâ€|jinxed me with thatâ€|comment earlier. About me notâ€|being your patient."

This time Reynolds grinned. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I should've known better than to think you wouldn't get mixed up in something out here. I'm just glad we were able to keep you on this side of the fence. Again."

"Yeah, meâ€|too. T-thanks."

"No problem, ma'am." He turned to leave then and I figured it was so he could attend to other patients, but he said, "I'll let you get some rest now, Colonel. But first, there's a visitor here for you. Since you're not on the brink of death anymore it's okay with me, but he can't stay too long, all right?"

"Yeah, sure."

After Doc Reynolds left I lay there waiting for Matthew to come through the doorway. I wanted to give him the best lecture I could manage in regards to his brave but ultimately reckless grenade toss in the middle of the fight, and how it'd almost cost us both our lives â€" but he wasn't the one who walked in.

Ethan was.

"Natalie, are you okay? I heard what happened and I came to see you as fast as I could." He looked flustered and frowned, amending, "Well, as soon as the medics would let me in, anyway. They said since I wasn't family I had to wait."

"Get out."

He gave me a puzzled look, like he'd misunderstood.

"What?"

"You heard me, Ethan. Out."

He released a long sigh. "Come on, Cooper. I know you don't like me, but I can't come check in on you when you almost died?"

Again I wanted to snort but couldn't. "Like you give a shit. This is no worse than what you did to me. Don't pretend like you care now."

"I never used any kind of weapon on you."

"Your fist was enough."

Much to my great annoyance, he stepped in closer and sat down on the chair beside the cot without replying. He didn't look at me, or say anything for a time. I didn't have the energy to fight him at the moment so I said nothing, too. I looked down at myself instead and saw I was still in my T-shirt and the pants of my fatigues, though my body armor and boots had been removed. There were bloodstains on the chain of my dogtags and down my shirt, and I could feel some caked blood on my neck and chin as well, making me itchy. So I'd probably only been out a few hours.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you, Natalie," Ethan said softly then.

"Great. Apology not accepted. You can leave now."

"I'm serious," he repeated, and he sounded sincere enough. "I really am sorry for what happened back then. It was wrong, and I should never have laid a hand on you. I was a messed up kid."

"Yeah, you were. We were both just kids. I don't know how you can do something like that to another person."

Ethan ran a hand over his short brown hair and let out another sigh. "I don't, either, to be honest. I made a mistake, Cooper, and believe me, I've had to live with it ever since."

Anger bubbled up inside me again, as it always did when my ex was near or speaking. "No. I've had to live with it. I'm only okay now because of Willis and the Corps, and because so many years have gone by. But you want to pity someone it sure as hell better not be yourself. Or me, because I'm over it. It took me years but I'm done. I'm done with it, Ethan."

"Then would you just talk to me again?" he asked.

I shook my head slowly. "No. You haven't earned that yet."

## 23. Chapter 22: News From the Front

### \*\*Chapter Twenty-Two: News From the Front\*\*

\*\*1014 Hours, July 30, 2558. UNSC Concord Naval Air Base, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Briefing," Planet Earth. Day Eleven of the War of Tomorrow\*\*

After dropping the kids off at camp, Major William "Willis" Hawk drove quickly from his morning physical therapy session to his air wing's command headquarters, where his CO, Major Erin Collins "soon to be lieutenant colonel" had once again notified him of some important proceeding he needed to be present for. He still wasn't cleared for flight, but as long as he was within his allotted amount of time to get better, he was still the air wing's XO. Obviously Collins felt it necessary to keep him in the loop while the majority of their pilots were gone on a mission somewhere with his wife's regiment.

Bringing up thoughts of Cooper made him frown. He knew it was silly of him to start to worry after only a week of not hearing from her while she was in the middle of a warzone, but he couldn't help it. And what made it worse was that the kids asked incessantly about her, too. Where she was, if she was okay, when she was coming home. Willis wondered all those things himself, so often he was at a loss as to what to say to their offspring. "I'm not sure where your mom is exactly, but I know she's doing fine and she'll come home just as soon as things are over," he answered.

Today had a different air about it, though, and he could feel something was wrong.

When he pulled up to the gate he showed no signs of anxiety, and gave a small smile to the guard as he handed the MP his military ID.

"Major Hawk, William Peter. UNSC Service Number 54210-36758-WH."

The MP glanced quickly at the card before handing it back. "Welcome back, sir. Go ahead and enter."

"Thanks, Sergeant."

Once inside the building Hawk pulled off his cover and received a number of salutes on the way to his CO's office. Again he felt a pang of hurt at that, like he always did. Being in the UNSC was the only life he'd known since the age of eighteen, when he and Cooper had been accepted into the Naval Academy on Reach together, on their way to becoming Marines. And he knew right off the bat he'd wanted to branch into flight school. He'd finally become a pilot at twenty when he was commissioned along with Natalie, and had excelled at it ever since, earning top accolades at a young age through his twenties. Now at thirty-one, if he was forced to give it all up at the end of the few months' extension he'd been given to heal, he wasn't sure what he was going to do. He found that despite the hardships, he'd miss all of being in the Corps a lot.

\_Don't think about that right now\_, Willis reminded himself. \_Talking up the negative only makes you give up. Believe you'll succeed, and

you just might.\_

Since Collins's aide was indisposed this morning, the major rapped at the door to the office himself. He waited for his CO's command of "Enter," before he did so, approaching her desk with a courteous nod.

"Major Collins. Good morning."

"Good morning, Hawk. Have a seat. How's the therapy going?"

Willis made a face as he sat down on the opposite side of the table. "There's been some steady improvements, but so far they're just small ones. Not what I need yet."

Collins nodded, leaning back in her chair. "I'm sorry for what happened to you, Major. As long as you're progressing, though, even if only a little, it's not a lost cause."

"I know. I guess it's more the prospect of not getting back in a cockpit that bugs me."

His CO's expression brightened. "I'd like to see anyone or anything get in the way of that. Other pilots wouldn't have been able to come back from what you did, but I believe you'll make it. It's in your blood, Hawk. You were born for this." She paused, then added, "From what I heard, you weren't even supposed to survive that crash. But you did. Just keep fighting it."

"I do, every day." \_I'll always fight for what I love,\_ he thought.

"Good. And the homefront's not treating you too badly? Your life must be hectic with your wife gone on deployment and three young kids to look after."

Willis chuckled. "It definitely takes some juggling, but we're doing all right. Mostly we just miss Cooper."

"I'm sure she does as well." Collins suddenly gave him a pointed look. "And I'm also sure that part of your trepidation stems from the fact that you don't even know where she is, am I correct?"

"That's right. She wasn't allowed to tell me when she left, and she still hasn't been cleared even now that they're on the ground. Must be something big."

The other major leaned forward again, hands clasped together in front of her. "What if I told you \_I'd \_just been given clearance to let you know?"

Hawk's eyes widened a bit. "You know where she is? Where?"

Collins dug into the pocket of her uniform pants for her datapad and pulled it out, tapping the screen a few times before a projection of a metallic sphere hovered between them on the desk. "It's an artificial planet called Requiem, in the Epoloch System. According to the two spooks there, the whole place has been a battleground for UNSC, Storm, and Promethean forces since around the time we landed on Khan several months ago. Your wife's regiment and

the handful of squadrons from the air wing we sent there were part of the new wave of reinforcements. The fighting there has beenâ€|overwhelming, at times, I've heard."

"Damn," Willis whispered. "What the hell are all those factions doing there? And more Prometheans? An artificial planetâ€|?"

Major Collins tapped her pad again and the display suddenly winked out of existence. "I'm sorry, Willis, but that's all I've been cleared to tell you. The spooks I got my information from were very clear on that."

\_So there's more,\_ Willis thought to himself. \_I wonder how much of the picture I'm really missing. \_He let out an internal sigh. \_But at least I know where Cooper is now, and what she and my little brother are up against if nothing else.\_

"Why now and not before?" he asked then. "If this was supposed to be that big of a secret, why'd they decide to let us in on it now, too?"

His CO frowned. "Because the brass is worried that things over there might not go in their favor, even if a sudden surge of troops is successful at containing the Storm and Promethean units surrounding them."

Willis wondered about that for all of a few seconds before her true meaning dawned on him. "You mean the enemy might find another way off-planet. A portal system, like we found on Khan."

"Perhaps. I wasn't granted that level of access yet either to know for sure, but it sounds like that could be a definite possibility."

"Shit." Major Hawk ran a hand over his face, suddenly worried not only for Natalie and his brother, but his kids as well. "And HighCom thinks if they do leave, their target might be Earth?"

"Yes. So we have to start preparing the remainder of the air wing for that contingency. Are you ready to do that?"

Hawk nodded without a second thought. "Of course. I won't let anything happen to the place we've called home the last five years."

"Good. Then there's some things to discuss, which is why I called you to meet with me today."

Collins started to go on, but something was still bothering Willis. Something she'd said, besides the big glaring obvious. It was a smaller detail that nagged at the back of his brain. Finally it came to him.

"Sorry to interrupt, but you said you got the intel from \_two\_ spooks on Requiem? Cooper and her regiment only left with one that I know of. Lieutenant Lloyd."

"That's true. But what was only recently released as general knowledge at our clearance level is that their transport ship stopped along the way to pick up another and his team." She tapped her



datapad again and concentrated, presumably scanning through files. "Yes. The other spook is listed as Lieutenant Commander Ackerson."

The name sent a wave of shock rippling through him. There was only one Ackerson he knew of who was in the Navy, and the rank fit. But it couldn't be. Ethan Ackerson was dead, had been dead for nearly six years. There was no way he was with Cooper now—was there?

"Major? Are you all right?"

The question brought Willis abruptly out of his thoughts, but the doubt and puzzling curiosity remained. "I'm fine. Please, go ahead."

Mistaking his lapse for concern over the news she'd just told him about preparing for a potential Earth invasion, Collins sighed. "I realize it's a lot to take in. You've got your younger brother and your wife fighting on a volatile planet far from your reach, you're unable to directly influence events yourself at the moment, and now there's been a threat made on the human homeworld where you've made your family home post-War. I know you have a lot of stake in this, Hawk, and plenty of people you want to protect. I know you're frustrated that you're not in a place to do anything about it or help them out the way you normally would. But I assure you, if the Storm or the Prometheans get out of control on Requiem and find their way here, we'll be ready for them."

It wasn't that Willis wasn't worried about all of that, too. Deep down, if he was honest with himself, it scared him. He'd almost lost Natalie and Gabriel on many separate occasions during the War, and they had lost their second child that they'd wanted so badly to the Covenant near its end. Willis knew firsthand that he had a lot to fear from another invasion so soon.

But it also worried him that someone like Ethan Ackerson might have somehow survived and was now stationed in the same area as his wife. He wondered what that might mean for Cooper, what Ethan might try to do, and more importantly—why—if it were true, and Ethan really was on Requiem right now with Natalie—she'd said nothing about it.

## 24. Chapter 23: Direct Hit

**\*\*Chapter Twenty-Three: Direct Hit\*\***

**\*\*0345 Hours, July 31, 2558. Forerunner Shield World Surface, Requiem. "The Memories," Epoloch System. Day Twelve of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

A week later I woke with a start in the middle of the night, as I'd been doing a lot lately - though thanks to the increased dose of my meds, I couldn't remember the nightmare that had forced me awake. It was some consolation but not a very big one, since with full consciousness also came a world of pain in my still-aching side.

I was upset with myself for getting hurt again, but I hadn't been about to sit back and do nothing while I watched my much-younger brother-in-law get killed. Since finding him alive on Khan a few

months ago I'd begun to view him as I used to when I'd been dating Willis in our last year of high school â€" Matt was like another little brother of mine, too. He'd been there for me on Khan when I needed his help, and I was always prepared to do the same, even if I hadn't known how much his older brother cared for him.

Right now though that sense of duty was throwing me into a very painful void. I sat up in my bunk in my command quarters with a groan, holding onto my side as I moved, but that did little to stop the throbbing ache. I dragged myself over to the small desk beside my bed and shook out one of the painkillers Doc Reynolds had given me, swallowing it dry. I'd only been officially released from the medical tent just two days ago, although I'd been discreetly doing work before then. But the pain was still bad at times.

Since I didn't have anything else on hand to wash the pill down with, and I anticipated another long night of little sleep thanks to formless nightmares and my wound, I pulled out my bottle of brandy that I'd smuggled from Earth and poured myself a small glass. I wasn't supposed to be mixing alcohol with the painkillers, but I figured I'd survived a hell of a lot worse over the years, and the situation warranted it. I felt like the drink calmed me down a little as soon as I swallowed it, and the throb in my side dulled after another few minutes.

While I sat there wide awake in my chair, I found myself staring at the small framed photograph of my family I'd set up on the desk and thought of calling Willis. I hadn't spoken to him for about a week and I missed him a lot, especially on nights like these when I woke up suddenly from dreams and found that he wasn't lying beside me. I missed my kids even more, and I wondered if the three of them were holding up okay in my absence.

During the day I had plenty to keep me busy, even while I'd been recuperating in the medtent. But at night, if I wasn't asleepâ€¦sometimes I couldn't stand the quiet. I didn't like being alone with my thoughts, so I poured myself a second small glass of the amber liquid, downed it in one quick swill, and went to pull on my uniform pants, jacket, and boots to go outside.

Before I left I picked up my pistol holster out of habit - just in case - although I wasn't planning on going out near the perimeter with no helmet and no armor. I'd learned my lesson after nearly getting sniped to death on Khan, where I'd been fully armed and in full gear and still found myself lying dead on Doc's table for five minutes after the shots. If I wanted to get some air during the night, I did it within the sanctuary of the inner quad of the outpost now, and not completely outside with the watch.

I was marveling at the temperature drop at night in the desert when I heard a sudden noise on my six. I whipped around with my hand on my sidearm, still holstered but ready, yet stopped when I saw who the figure sitting behind me was.

"Jesus," I said, mildly irritated. "You didn't think it might've been nice to know you were there?"

The figure cloaked in the darkness chuckled. "It's funnier to watch you jump."

"Well, I'm armed and I've had a bit to drink, so you might want to rethink that plan."

"Hey, I was just sitting here minding my own business when you walked by. So it's really you encroaching on my territory."

I snorted. "Considering this is my outpost, you're wrong again." I frowned in the dark. "What are you doing out here, anyway?"

"Probably same as you, I think. Couldn't sleep."

My tone took on a harder edge. "Because you've finally realized what crap you are?"

Ethan sighed. "Come on, Natalie. Are we back to that now?"

"We were never anywhere else. I didn't ever say I forgave you, and I definitely won't forget."

"I apologized to you a few days ago. I said I was sorry."

At that I almost laughed. "Please. You used to say you were sorry all the time, Ethan. It didn't mean much then, so why should I put any stock in it now?"

"Because it's different now," he replied quietly. "And I know you won't admit it to yourself and you don't like it, but I think deep down you know that."

I held my hands up in surrender. "Fine. Think what you want, but so long as we're both out here unable to catch zees, I'm going to go find myself another corner to sit in."

Ethan released a second sigh, more forceful this time. "Does Willis ever remark on how stubborn you are?"

"My relationship with my husband is none of your business, Ethan."

"Do you want to know how I survived Operation Everest or not?"

That made me pause. I'd been wanting to know ever since I'd seen him step onto our transport ship like he was back from the dead. I knew he realized I'd take the bait in a heartbeat and almost wanted to deny him that, but I wanted to find out what happened more. Grudgingly I inched closer.

"Okay," I said slowly, folding my arms across my chest. "Tell me how it went down and we'll see if I believe you. Keep in mind I'm not the only one who saw your body."

Now that I was standing nearer I could see Ethan roll his eyes.

"Yes. You told me Willis supposedly saw me, too."

"And your CO at the time, Lieutenant Commander Stephanie Glorio, confirmed your presence on the team. So how is it that you went from live human to animated-dead Flood beast and back?"

Ethan scoffed. "You believe the word of a woman who later went insane, by your own after-action report and others'?"

"So you read the files."

"Of course I did. ONI, remember?"

I frowned as an unpleasant thought came to mind. "Ethan, there's something else I've been wanting to ask you. You neverâ€¦used your position to check up on me, did you?"

He shook his head. "No. After I got out, I really just wanted to put the whole thing behind me. My dad encouraged me to erase theâ€¦incident from my mind and move on, and focus on getting my schooling done and get a career going. He shipped me off to a military academy using his influence, since they wouldn't normally have taken me in after what I did, and I decided to stay. Threw myself into my studies, got a commission, and went on my first tour of duty aboard a battered frigate." He looked up then and smirked a little. "Did a good tour of duty with the girls on board, too."

I snorted a laugh. "You always were a charmer. I bet that got you into a lot of beds."

"Never in yours, though."

I gave a noncommittal shrug. "I was waiting for it to feel right. It started to that second summer we were together, and I thought I was falling for you." I took a deep breath. "But then you started changing, and all I felt after that was scared and hurt."

"And then your Willis came swooping in to save the day." Ethan said it more with self-deprecation than bitterness, so I let it go.

"He was there for me and a good friend. Things just progressed naturally from there once you left. I owe most of what I am today to him."

"Don't sell yourself short, Cooper." Ethan ran a hand over his hair. "I promise I didn't check up on you in the past, and I read about Everest only because I was supposed to be there and was curious as to how it turned out. But I did peek into your CSV a bit when I found out we'd be getting posted together this time around." He gestured vaguely to my uniform. "And it's not hard to see you're a cut above the rest. Willis is what, a major now? And I'm still an O-4, too. You've already got a leg up on your peers and were getting ready for more before we got the call."

"You know I was at War College on Earth, then," I stated.

"Yeah. Not everyone gets in there, you know. Especially at our age."

"So I've heard." I glanced down at my boots, thinking about what he'd said. "You mentioned Operation Everest and how you were supposed to be there. What do you mean?"

"Technically I didn't 'survive' anything because I wasn't there," he finally answered. "I got my orders to ship and to report to

Lieutenant Commander Glorio to be part of the team; that much was true. I received a data packet on the mission and everything. By then I'd been a spook for two years, and I was even billed as being her second-in-command during the operation. But my father got wind of it, and he refused to send me there. Said it was too dangerous."

"Because of the Flood," I guessed.

Ethan nodded. "My dad was a lot of things, as you know, and not so much concerned about my fate as the general idea of losing his son â€" his heir, you could say. So he wasn't about to send his kid in what looked to be a giant death trap from the start.

"He tried to get me off the team the usual way, exerting his influence, but on this the brass weren't willing to budge. We'd lost a lot of good operatives in the War, humanity was down to the wire, and now not even I could be protected as much as Dad would've liked. They said my orders were set and I had to go. I went back to my room aboard the ship I was on at the time and started packing, but then my dad came up with something else."

I frowned again, wondering where he was going with this, but my ex didn't pause long in his story.

"Since I couldn't officially avoid going, my dad looked into finding someone to go in my place." He scratched at the side of his head, like he still couldn't believe his father had managed to pull it off. "I'd never worked with Commander Glorio before so as long as the papers and the look matched, he knew she wouldn't know the difference. The trick was finding a spook who was the same rank and looked enough like me that my new team wouldn't notice a swap."

"Fuck, Ethan."

He swallowed. "I know. I shouldn't have gone along with it; we would've both gotten in big trouble if I'd been found out, not to mention the poor unlucky shit who had to go in my place. But it was my dad, and you know I never had the balls to stand up to him. Eventually he found someone to do it, and apparently paid him a considerable sum to play his part â€" along with promises ofâ€|'advancing' his career once it was over." Then he shrugged. "Guy never came back, though, so I guess it wasn't really worth it."

"Worked out well for you, though."

"It did and it didn't. I wasn't consumed by the Flood like the guy you saw and thought was me, but it's not a good feeling to know another sailor died in your place. I think you can attest to the fact that I didn't grow up with the highest morals, but I was taught a lot of things a couple years later in the UNSC that I did take to heart. Duty and sacrifice and service to my fellow Navy â€" and later ONI â€" crewmembers were among them. I felt like I'd completely turned my back on my oath as an officer, and that stuck."

I gave him a look. "And was part of your epiphany being a dick to your colleagues? Because I haven't seen your attitude changed very much so far, at least when you spoke to Cal that first time."

Again he shrugged, and a corner of his lips turned up. "I didn't say I turned into a saint overnight. Some things don't change, at least not that radically. But I guess I'd say I'm a little less bad than before."

"Wow. What an amazing improvement," I responded dryly.

At that Ethan laughed, a genuine sound I hadn't heard from him in many years. "All right, fine. Then I'll say I'm not that good, but not that bad anymore, either. Better?"

This time I was the one who shrugged in reply. "Yeah. That'll work. Although I've yet to see a whole lot that would push me in the direction of believing you've changed."

"I have," he said sincerely. "With you, I mean. You're not afraid of much anymore, and you don't let people push you around. You're solid and resolute, yet caring, and your men love you for that. I can see it. You've turned into a very impressive woman, Natalie Cooper."

Coming from anyone else I would've been flattered by the compliment, but this was Ethan. Despite what I'd said, I could tell from our talk tonight that he had changed to some degree over the years, too. My dilemma was whether or not to believe it. I'd heard him pronounce his altered ways so many times before in the past, only to get the notion violently knocked out of my head, that it was going to take me more time to determine if this was real or not.

So instead of answering him directly, I said, "Thanks for telling me what happened. I was curious to know."

I turned to leave then before he could say anything else, and I could almost feel his confused stare boring into my back. I didn't turn around though, and instead headed back to my quarters to think. Before I hadn't wanted to be alone with my mind swirling, but now, I had a lot more to ruminate.

I'd just pulled off my jacket and boots and dropped onto my bunk, side still aching dully and hands meshed behind my head as I laid back, when I heard a sudden loud sound not too far off. I was back on my feet in an instant, heart hammering in my chest, and then there was a pounding at my door.

"Natalie! Wake up!"

"Christ, I'm awake," I muttered, upset that Ethan would come bother me here. "I don't fall asleep that damn fast, even if I could." Once I opened the door, I stared at him crossly. "What the hell was that about?"

"One of the outer mines just exploded outside the outpost," Ethan replied, nearly breathless. "We're under attack."

## 25. Chapter 24: A Fire Burns Bright

**\*\*Chapter Twenty-Four: A Fire Burns Bright\*\***

After I scrambled into the rest of my gear I rushed out, battle rifle in hand and helmet on my head, and went towards the front entrance of Outpost Xavier. My outpost. The one I'd come all the way out here to expand and defend. And whatever was attacking us now would know it.

"Any idea which of our enemies rang the doorbell?" I shouted at Ethan as I ran.

"Not sure!" he yelled back. "I just heard the explosion, Colonel, same as you!"

\_Colonel.\_ We were back to formalities, which suited me just fine. Especially given the fact that we were approaching the perimeter watch now and others would be present. A part of me hoped he wouldn't stick too close and that we could split up soon.

"Marines, what's the report from the forward OP?" I said, addressing the men and women waiting at the front with their rifles raised.

All I got in response was a shake of the head from one of the squad leaders. "Don't know, ma'am. We didn't get any report from the OP. Just that first hit that got us moving."

\_Shit.\_ That wasn't a good sign. I gripped my rifle tighter to my middle. "Where's Captain Diaz?"

"Here, ma'am," the former acting outpost commander answered, coming toward me down the line of Marines at a fast clip. "I can confirm what Sergeant Zuhl said. Nothing from the OP, Colonel."

"Then they're either asleep at the wheel or dead," I said plainly. "Neither of which bodes well for us. Let's get these men organized, Captain, and alert the snipers on the cliffs that we've got company."

"Right away, ma'am."

"Sergeant Zuhl?"

"Colonel?"

"Make sure the machine gunners are in place as well, and stocked with ammo. We might just have a scouting patrol coming up in the dark, but we could have something big, too."

"Yes, ma'am."

No sooner had I given my orders than another explosion rocked the ground several meters out. I flinched but didn't quite duck at the sound, knowing it was too far off to do us any damage yet. But something was definitely coming. I turned to my ex next.

"Ethan, go wake Major Brewer and Lieutenant Lloyd while I oversee things out here. She's usually in the command tent but I'd bet they're asleep in their quarters now. Or were. We're going to need their help."

I wasn't quite sure how he was going to take a direct command from me, but much to my surprise, he didn't answer with a smart remark

this time. He just nodded and obeyed.

"Right. On it."

As soon as he left I gave my entire focus to the task at hand, opening a COM channel immediately to my other battalion commanders. "This is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper! Everyone needs to gear up now! The outpost is under attack! We need all hands on deck so get your men ready! Major Delaney?"

"Ma'am?"

"I need your Marines at the entrance ten minutes ago. Major Harris!"

My former battalion XO was slow to respond, probably just now coming out of a deep sleep. "Colonel?"

"Keep your Marines in reserve but prepare. We might need them soon."

"Yes, ma'am!"

With that out of the way, I went down the forward line of Marines to look for Diaz again. When I found him, I grabbed his shoulder to get his attention. "Captain, do you have your field binoculars on you?"

He looked puzzled in the dark. "Yes, ma'am. Why?"

"Hand them over. I need to see what the hell happened at the damn OP and what's out there heading for us."

I'd left mine in my quarters in my rush to leave. I lifted the captain's now to the rim of my helmet and took a long, sweeping look through them. The forward observation post seemed empty, just as I'd feared, but I couldn't tell for sure this far out. I'd have to send a team over to confirm their status later. What I saw in the meantime, though, was a whole lot of Prometheans gunning for our lines in the middle of the night.

"Fuck."

"Colonel?"

For a second I'd forgotten Diaz was even there. "It's not good, Captain," I said, shoving his binoculars back in his grasp. "OP looks abandoned, and the Prometheans are on their way. Stay sharp."

Even in the dark I saw Captain Diaz's face blanch. The outpost was in much better shape now than when I'd found it, and we had much better defenses set up and lots more troops to help keep the enemy at bay, but that was more AI-bots than I'd ever seen gathered in one spot more than on Qamar, too. Unless our mines magically blew up half of them, we were in for a fierce fight.

\* \* \*

><p>I felt helpless as the Marines on the forward line and I just sat waiting while the Prometheans teleported in. Closer and closer,



sometimes landing on a mine and sending a few of the bastards bursting into fiery sparks, but sometimes not. Sometimes we weren't that lucky, and until the mechanical things got into range of our weapons, there was nothing more we could do to stop them.<p>

Finally a few sniper rifles opened up behind us, high above the rest of the outpost from the cliffs. I watched in the dark as more bright sparks filled the sky, but I knew that picking them off one by one wasn't going to reduce the force by that much by the time they got here, and the mines had been a precaution only "enough to give us a warning of their approach in case the OP failed to, but not enough blasting power to get rid of a large mob. And that's what I saw them as: overwhelming and thirsty for blood.

"Holy shit. I've never seen that many of them before," Major Justin Delaney whispered beside me, gesturing his Marines to take up positions near the wall.

I snorted, itching to be on the forward line myself but purposely holding back a bit, knowing that more than an extra gun on hand, my Marines needed their leader alive right now. "Neither have I, Major. And I've been in worse shit than this before."

"Damn. What the hell are they?"

"Sort of like AIs, but I like to call them robots." My grin was faint, but I hoped it put him a little more at ease. "Watch out for the EMP grenades they like to toss into the fray. They'll frazzle your helmet electronics and tag you while you're disoriented from the reboot."

"Right."

Our forward MGs opened up then, and there wasn't much to hear after that above the din. I raised up my rifle now that the enemy was in range, using my scope to pick off a few Watchers and help deal some damage against the Knights they hovered around. My aching side made itself felt with each buck of the gun, held tight against my shoulder to keep it stable, but I ignored the pain and went on.

"Got your XO and the other spook here, ma'am," I heard Ethan say behind me then.

I nodded curtly, distracted. "Great. Send them over. I need you to do something else for me."

"What is it?"

"I have to know what happened to our Marines out at the OP. I can take a pretty good guess from what I saw, but I'd like to be sure. Gather up your team and go. Just remember to keep your heads down, and don't attract any attention your way. There's a lot more of them out there than you."

Ethan gave me a look. "Natalie, I have done this before, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But like I said, there's a ton of those robotic bastards out there, and I don't want to send more of my men to their deaths. Be quick about it."

"Yes, ma'am."

My security detail arrived shortly after that, surrounding me as the first Prometheans reached the outer wall. Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd came in amongst them, gripping his own battle rifle tight.

"Ma'am, what's going on?" he shouted over the noise.

"A mine went off just outside the perimeter a few minutes ago!" I yelled in return. "Prometheans! We had no warning. Looks like the OP got hit hard and fast before they could get the message out. I sent Lieutenant Commander Ackerson and his team to investigate!" I glanced around, curious when I didn't see my XO. "Where's Brewer?"

"She split off and headed for the far side of the wall to help with the defense! Said you probably wouldn't want the two of you so close in case something happens."

"Good thinking."

"Anything I can do?"

"Join the fight, Lieutenant! We could use the firepower."

I wanted to give him something more concrete to work on, but the wave of teleporting enemies reached our position too fast. As I lifted my rifle to squeeze off rounds of my own, I saw one of the Knights quickly bound the wall and stab one of the machine gunners right through his chestplate with its purple blade. I rapidly switched my aim and fired a series of bursts at the tall Promethean, making mechanical noises as it took the hits, until one of its Watchers showed up, trailing smoke. Staff Sergeant Lynch started to raise his SAW to bring it down, but it managed to shoot at us first.

I grabbed my aide and pulled him into cover just as the spray of lights rounds rushed at us. They hit the top of the low barricade we were crouched behind, making most of what I could see a flash of yellow-orange pinpricks. It was then that I knew we had to find some other means of stemming the tide or we'd be toast "and there wasn't enough space up here to bring in a whole other battalion to help.

"Heat, it's Cooper!" I shouted over the COM, finally deciding to hail the pilots still camped out at the LZ. "We could use a squadron in the air right now!"

"Got it, Colonel! Just tell us where you want us. I'll scramble the birds."

In Willis's absence his former wingmate, Captain Brandon Heat, had taken over my husband's Kilo Squadron. The other that had come with us that Willis was also normally in charge of, Victor, had been given over to another captain in the air wing since Heat didn't have as much leadership experience. I wondered how things would go with Brandon at the helm, but I guess I was about to find out.

Turning to face the spook as light rounds continued to assault our position, I said to him next, "Cal, as soon as we take care of this bastard I want you to get us the exact coordinates of the minefield

we placed. Make sure Commander Ackerson and his team are out of the blast zone, then call it in. We've got our air support coming in hot!"

Lieutenant Lloyd lifted an eyebrow. "You're blowing the rest of the minefield, ma'am?"

I couldn't help the small grin that spread across my face. "Can't think of a better way to turn these AI-bots into sparking scrap. It'll enhance the blast of the payload our flyboys are carrying and blow a bunch of these things to hell."

But first we needed the Knight and the Watcher out of the way. With the other Marines nearby busy with their own targets, I chanced popping up out of cover at the same time as my aide let loose a long burst from his SAW, causing the Knight " caught off-guard and nearly at point-blank range now " to warp into thousands of particles of light. It all happened while I fired off a precise burst from my battle rifle at the same time, bringing the pesky, smoking Watcher down around its charge.

I rose up the minute the mechanical beings were gone and cried, "Cal, now!"

"On it!"

While the spook got a hold of Ethan and fed the pilots the coordinates we needed, I motioned to Staff Sergeant Lynch to have my security detail move out with me to new cover. A group of Captain Diaz's Marines " part of the original contingent of the outpost " were fighting hard in front of us, getting a run for their money with a pack of Crawlers who were attempting to scramble over the wall. Sparks flew out on our twelve as one of the Marines pulled out his combat knife and shoved it hard into the body of the doggy AI, damaging it to some degree, but not enough. Thankfully his battle buddy took up the mantle in the next moment and shot the robotic animal dead with his magnum, saving his friend.

\_We better get those wings up soon,\_ I thought to myself as we moved.  
\_We've got the whole Promethean army on our ass.\_

My first order of business when we reached cover was hailing Captain Heat again " or at least that's what I wanted it to be before the shots rang out.

I ducked my head for what felt like the hundredth time in the last few minutes when more Crawlers lunged over the wall. One of them had an SMG-like light weapon that made mince-meat of the fireteam of Marines ahead of us, downing three men and two women in a flash of a second. Lynch was proactive once again and shoved me down hard behind cover before the next burst, then rose up with his SAW and took out the head group in one sweep. Only then did he let me go.

"Colonel, are you all right?"

Wincing from the sudden intense pain in my side, I grit my teeth and nodded. "Yeah. I'm good." Although the jarring of my still-healing wound hurt so bad I wanted to puke.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you, ma'am. I didn't want you getting

killed."

"Iâ€¦|appreciate that, Staff. Thanks."

Without warning, another two Crawlers leapt over the side, clearing the dead bodies in front of us in their jump and bowling into Lynch before he could react. For my part, I sucked up the hurt and slung my rifle behind my back, unholstered my pistol and pounced onto the AI-bot's back, shooting it point-blank until its body finally sparked and shut down. I had just enough time to look down at the staff sergeant and see he was okay before the second metallic Fido crashed into my ribs and pinned me against another barricade, making me scream in pain.

"\_Colonel!\_"

In some way I still couldn't quite piece together, the doggy bot shot off a couple of point-blank rounds itself, trying to kill me with its gun since it hadn't managed with its bulk â€" yet. I could feel my skin break open again where I'd been patched up and felt the thick liquid ooze down the side of my stomach. If I didn't bleed out or get shot to death, this Promethean was determined to do it for me.

I struggled against the mechanical beast as best I could, but the pain was taking over and I was still too weak from all the action to do myself much good. At one point the thing reared back to headbutt me again â€" probably right on my wound a second time, which I had no doubt would knock me unconscious from the hurt. I tried to move out of the way in time but I couldn't, and so I braced myself against the barricade to take the hit.

That's when I heard the enraged growl off to the side. From a human.

In seconds a Marine had gone crashing into the Crawler, forcing it off me as it tackled the thing to the ground. I heard half of a pistol clip being emptied into the robotic being, and then all that was left beside me was a heaping pile of scrap metal in the dirt.

It took me a moment to realize that it hadn't been a Marine at all; the battledress uniform wasn't right. His was black, almost impossible to see in the dark, although I recognized his face as soon as he turned to look at me. Ethan.

"You're back," I croaked, still in a haze of pain and getting lightheaded from the blood seeping past the bandages underneath my fatigues. The side of my T-shirt was already soaked through and wet, and I could feel my uniform jacket getting damp, too. "The OPâ€¦|?"

Ethan shook his head, rising to a crouch behind the barricade to make his way back to me. "Gone, Colonel. Everyone inside was already dead. Stab wounds. Knights must've teleported in first so they couldn't alert us."

"Shit."

He was beside me then and already moving to pick me up. "You're welcome for saving you, by the way. Let's get you to Doc."

I grabbed hold of his arm to stop him. "Pilots?"

Ethan smiled in the dark. "On their way, Cooper. It'll be over soon."

\* \* \*

><p>I heard the subsequent bombardment from inside the medical tent, as I lay on Reynolds's table once again getting pumped full of new biofoam and IV fluid before he wrapped up my side in a fresh bandage. Ethan stood off to the side with his arms folded across his chest, watching the medic work since he was the one who'd brought me in and Doc had had to get to it fast to stop the bleeding. Luckily Reynolds hadn't needed to take off my shirt to do the job, just rolled up the lower half to cover my bra and expose my stomach. Otherwise I'd have insisted Ethan sit this one out. Way out.<p>

"So, Docâ€¦am I still alive?" I asked him, still feeling a little foggy from the hit.

Reynolds gave me a look. "Yes, ma'am. Although I can't stress how important it is to stay out of trouble while your body's trying to heal." He frowned. "You know if it were up to me, you'd still be on bed rest."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But I'veâ€¦got a regiment to run, and I can'tâ€¦control when the Prometheans come in toâ€¦kick our ass."

The medic snorted. "Uh-huh. Just make sure we've still got a commander at the end of all this, okay?"

I smiled weakly. "I will."

As Doc turned to leave he glanced over at Ethan, but didn't say anything. I pulled down my blood-soaked T-shirt and pushed myself up to a half-sitting position once he was gone, leaning back on my arms â€" although that hurt as well.

"Damn," I muttered to myself, wincing. "I hope that kid is grateful for what I did, because I'm sure paying for it."

"What kid?" my ex asked.

"Matt. He's the one I was trying to get out of the way when I got hit."

"And how do you know he didn't do it on purpose to get you killed?"

I glanced up sharply at him. "He wouldn't, Ethan. He did what any good Marine does and went out to do something brave to protect his own. He's just new at this stuff so he couldn't get it done in time by himself. I had to help."

Ethan snorted. "You have a lot of trust in someone who was our enemy when you met, and who'd been missing from your lives for that long."

"How do you know that? I thought you said you didn't read my file."

"I didn't. That much I found out about the regular way when I was still in jail â€" everyone heard about that ship carrying school kids getting hit by the Covies. The ship's manifest was public and I read the names. I know Willis's baby brother was among them."

"And you just happen to know he survived and where he came from?"

"Obviously I looked into his file. But no, I didn't get that info snooping through yours."

I frowned then but eased up. That actually made sense. "Okay, whatever," I said, more with resignation than heat. "I'm not talking about this with you. Thanks for getting me out of a tough spot back there and bringing me to Doc."

Ethan stopped me when I started to get up. I shot him a deep glare and opened my mouth to say something, but he beat me to it.

"Why do you trust the little reb so much? I know you'd probably say he's family so it doesn't matter, but you and I both know a lot can change in that many years. What makes you think he isn't playing you and your husband precisely because he knows the two of you will forgive anything he does?"

"That's none of your business," I retorted, this time with definite heat. "And for starters, he didn't land me in the fucking hospital, even if it was fourteen years ago. He's a good kid and has done exactly nothing to make me feel like any of us should be threatened by him. You, you've done a lot. So yeah, I'll take his word over yours any day."

As I pushed past him and got up, my ex released a sigh.

"Natalie, I'm not trying to get back on your shitlist. I just want you to be aware of what might be going on around you, since I know this isn't something Willis would be too wary of. His judgment's clouded by his love for his brother. He still sees a kid where there's now a grown man who hasn't been around his real family since he was seven. You have to be careful for the both of you, or you could get hurt."

At that I stood face-to-face with him and scowled. "Are you suggesting my husband isn't capable of protecting me and our family? Really? Because I remember him kicking the shit out of you when you tried to come near me after what happened. He'd never put me or our kids in danger like that. For anything."

Ethan took the jab in stride and sighed. "Just think about it for a second, Nat. Since you left Khan Matthew's not only found a way into the Inner Colonies, right on Earth, but also wheedled his way into the UNSC Marines. Even at his rank, imagine how fucking beneficial that would be to his rebel buddies back in Redwood Falls if he were in contact with them right now. He could be telling them all about what we find out here."

I shook my head. "No. You're wrong. And I don't have time for this, Ethan. I've got a regiment to run and an outpost to secure. But back. Off. Matt."

I left him standing there alone in the room. For once he didn't try to come after me, and for that I was grateful. I had enough on my plate right now between the attack and my wound that I just didn't have the energy to deal with him, too.

\* \* \*

><p>"Bombing run complete, ma'am," Captain Heat said over the COM once I'd replaced my helmet. "Should be good to go now, Colonel. Just stragglers from what we can see up here."<p>

"Right, we'll mop them up. Good work, Heat."

"Thanks, Cooper. Till next time."

With the number of Marines we had on hand, mop-up duty took all of ten minutes. By then the entrance to Outpost Xavier looked like one big, blackened blast zone, with the OP completely gone and the minefield nothing but a rocky, cratered mess. But the huge unit of Prometheans who'd assaulted the compound were dead now, and no longer a threat. And as I looked out at the aftermath of the chaos, I realized that this was an opportunity.

I went to look for Lieutenant Lloyd since I couldn't stand talking to Ethan right now and got his attention. He jogged up to me and stood straight before me, out of respect.

"Ma'am. Hell of a battle, but we did it."

"Yeah. I'm glad to see you made it out okay. Major Brewer?"

Lloyd smiled slightly. "Safe as well, ma'am. She's busy getting the battalion commanders gathered for a debrief."

"Excellent. Tell her I'll be right there, just as soon as we've got this place secure again."

"Will do, Colonel."

He turned to go, thinking that's what I'd called him over for, but I stopped him.

"Cal, one more thing."

The ONI operative turned back. "What's that?"

"Once we have things situated, I want you to get the scientists out here to take a look around," I said. "There's tons of downed Prometheans and their weapons out here for them to sift through, and they wouldn't have to go too far out to find them. We can protect them a lot better from here than we'd be able to out on patrol. That way they can start their studies."

Lloyd nodded. "Sounds good. I'll let them know."

"Thanks." \_I hope that'll get us home quicker,\_ I thought to myself.

I wasn't exactly sure what information the UNSC was fishing for out

here, but I did know that the faster they got it, and the faster the enemy was contained, the sooner I could get my Marines and I off this shield planet.

## 26. Chapter 25: Those We Left Behind

**\*\*Chapter Twenty-Five: Those We Left Behind\*\***

**\*\*1756 Hours, August 4, 2558. Cooper-Hawk Residence, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Letter," Planet Earth. Day Sixteen of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

"All right, G-man, show me what you got!"

Willis tried to stifle a smile as his eight-year-old son got a determined look on his face, staring him down. With his green eyes showing his state of intense concentration, along with the deep crease of his brow, Gabriel looked just like his mother in that moment. The same color irises, the same tenacity, the same desire to win, were written all over his expression.

"Here comes, Dad!"

"Okay, buddy! Boot it!"

Gabriel gave the goal behind his father one last glance before getting in behind the soccer ball and kicking it hard. The ball launched forward in a slight arc and went right past Willis's reaching hand, sinking into the left corner of the net. Gabe was already letting out a whoop as the senior Hawk landed sideways in the grass.

"Yeah! I beat you!"

Major Hawk pushed himself up from the ground in one swift motion, noticing with pleasant surprise that he could do so without any wince of pain. He was continuing to improve, then, and the therapy was finally starting to help. It boded well for his attempt at salvaging his career as an aviator — even if he still couldn't play his oldest son's favorite sport for shit.

"Nice work, Gabe," he said, looking up at his little boy's wide grin. "Now get back in line. We'll give your brother and sister another try, too."

Gabe obeyed but hunched his shoulders a little in disappointment. Willis would've figured that with all the hours his son spent playing the sport during camp that he'd be sick of it when he got home, but Gabriel was actually still rearing to go if given the chance to play with his dad and siblings. Willis though it had some to do with the game itself, and a lot to do with the fact that the boy missed his mother, and enjoyed spending time with the rest of his family at the end of the day in her absence.

\_We all miss you, Coop,\_ Hawk thought to himself then as Olivia stepped up to the soccer ball next. Being four years younger than their older brother, she and Liam were allowed to bring the ball closer to the goal before giving it a shot. \_I know things can get crazy in the field, but it'd be nice if you gave us a call soon. Just



to know you're okay.\_

"I'm gonna kick it, Daddy! Watch out!"

"Go ahead, sweetheart."

Unlike her brother, Olivia took no time at all to line up her shot and stare intimidatingly at their dad. She just ran up to the ball and kicked hard, sending it careening against the far post as it bounced forward again, landing in the grass a few feet ahead of her. Gabriel giggled behind her at her performance, to which Olivia turned around and gave him the stink eye, but Willis was impressed.

"Very good, Liv! That almost went in! Now let Liam try."

Little Liam approached the ball in much the same way his twin sister had, but showed he had a little more Cooper in him by looking right at Willis first. His eyes were what gave him away, though â€" they were hazel like his dad's.

"Daddy, it's coming!"

Willis gestured for him to go ahead. "Let 'er rip, son!"

At the last second Liam's attentive expression morphed into a grin as he kicked the ball towards the goal. Unfortunately for him he sent the soccer ball sailing straight into his father's chest, blocking it before he could score.

"\_Aww!\_" Liam cried, looking up at the sky in frustration with his little fists balled up.

The major just smiled. "Li, it's okay, bud! That was a good try!"

"But I didn't beat Gabe!"

Smirking â€" and again looking a lot like his mother in the gesture â€" Gabriel walked up to his little brother and said, "That won't happen for a while, Li. But Dad's right. It was a good shot." He took possession of the soccer ball with his left foot and kicked it around between his left and right in front of Liam. "You want to fake out the goalie next time. I can show you if you want."

"Me, too?" Olivia asked.

"Yup. Come 'ere."

Willis's smile broadened as he made his way over to his kids. Gabriel was turning into a good older brother, doing his best to focus less on Cooper's being gone and more on helping his siblings cope. Hawk was proud of him and he knew Natalie would be, too. \_If she were here\_, he thought. \_And if she'd call so I could tell her.\_

Just then Willis heard a \_click\_ on the outer gate going into the backyard. Someone had just come in. He pulled out his datapad to check the camera feed positioned at the top of the fence, but stopped short when he saw who it was. He whipped around.

"Jamie?"

"Hey, big bro. Do you let just anyone walk right through the door to your yard?" His younger sister shook her head. "Security's that lax around here, huh?"

Willis smirked and pointed out the video clip on his datapad. "Not even. Caught you red-handed."

"Shit. I mean, shoot." Jamie corrected herself, noticing the proximity of the kids. She glanced at her older brother and mouthed, "Sorry."

The major waved her apology away. "It's okay. It happens from time to time. Soâ€¦what're you doing out here? It's good to see you."

Both Hawks broke into big grins then as they hugged each other, and then Jamie went to smother her niece and nephews in greeting as well.

"Well, actually I was hoping to catch Matt and Natalie before they left, but I guess I was a little late to that party," she said. "Finally got some leave so I decided to come see how you and the kids were holding up."

"We're doing all right. Just waiting to hear from Cooper again. It's been almost two weeks, although she let me know last time that things were kind of dicey out there."

"Out where?"

Willis shook his head. "I can't say. I didn't even know myself until a few days ago."

"Oh," Jamie replied, drawing out the word. "Look at my big brother, suddenly privy to top secret operations."

Hawk chuckled. "Not all the time. Want to head inside with us?"

"Sure."

As they went up the steps onto the deck, Olivia tugged on the hem of his shorts.

"Daddy, I'm thirsty."

"Me, too," Liam said.

"Me three!" Gabe cried, running past his father, aunt, and siblings and into the house. "And I'm first!"

"No fair!" Liam whined, rushing after him.

"Hey, wait for me!" Olivia yelled.

That left just Willis and Jamie out back, and his sister started to laugh.

"Were we that bad as kids, too?"

Willis scratched at the side of his head. "I'd like to say no, butâ€¦I bet Mom and Dad would think different."

Jamie just grinned wider. "I think you're right."

They went inside after the kids then and Willis pulled out a jug of lemonade from the fridge and poured everyone a glass. Everyone except Liam, who hated the sour taste of the stuff, and got a cold cup of fruit punch instead.

As soon as Olivia and the boys were settled with their drinks, Willis ushered them into the living room and flicked on the holoscreen.

"Okay, guys. Go ahead and relax for a bit while I talk to your aunt Jamie," he said. "We'll be just outside on the deck. Stay where we can see you. We'll be back in a few minutes."

"Daddy," Liam whined. "I wanna watch cartoons in the bedroom."

"Oh, no. You guys aren't going on Mommy and Daddy's bed all sweaty like that. Baths first. In a little bit."

Liam frowned but said nothing, eventually getting wrapped up in what his siblings were doing. The three of them crowded onto the carpet together just in front of the couch to watch what was happening on-screen.

Willis turned back to his sister. "They'll be good for a half-hour or so," he said. Jamie nodded and they walked outside.

Once they'd situated themselves out on the deck chairs, where they had a clear view of the living room and the kids, Willis took a sip of his drink as his sister smirked at him from behind her sunglasses.

"So how goes the forced celibacy?"

Willis almost choked on the liquid in his mouth, then gave her a look. "I miss Cooper a lot, if that's what you're asking. And not just for that." He sighed, leaning back. "It's almost been a month since she left, Jame, and I've only heard from her once. I know that's not too bad considering, butâ€¦we're not really used to being separated for this long anymore. Hasn't happened to us in quite a few years."

"Then there's the kids," Jamie remarked.

"Yeah. They miss her, too. Gabe especially, although he tries not to show it. He understands more of what's going on than the twins, so he gets how dangerous her being deployed can be. He knows there's a chance she might not come back."

"I'm not sure that's possible. Natalie's gotten herself out of a lot of tough scrapes in the past."

"No argument there, but your luck runs out sometime, right?" He looked down at his sneakers, feeling somewhat strange in his civilian clothes. "She was having a real hard time before she left. Nightmares and crying and drinking. I'm worried about her being back in the fray

when she's been dealing with so much on her own lately." \_Not to mention this whole thing with Ethan\_ he added silently to himself. That he still wasn't sure what to make of. He didn't even know if the guy was really alive or not. But it bothered him just the same.

Jamie leaned in closer and put a reassuring hand on her big brother's shoulder. "She's not alone, Will. She's got you."

"Yeah." He set his drink down on the table behind them and folded his arms across his chest. "I think as demanding as it was, War College was actually good for her. It gave her the feeling of being in the middle of things without the risk, and she got to come home and be around family at the end of the day and most weekends. It was giving her a much-needed break. But then those idiots at HighCom decided to ship her off again when we'd just gotten home, so\_ He left it at that and shrugged.

"I get it, bro. It sucks. But that's what we all signed up for."

"Yup."

She gave his arm a light punch then. "What about you? Back in the saddle yet?"

Willis rolled his eyes. "You mean the cockpit?"

"Yeah. How's your inspiring return to flight going?"

"More hard work than inspiration, but I think I'm finally getting better. I'm all healed up from the wounds physically, but now I'm starting to get some of the flight motions back. Nothing major yet \_"

"But some improvement is better than none," she finished.

"Right."

"And Matt?"

"He's chugging along. Excited to be a full-fledged Marine now. I'm sorry you didn't get to see him before he left."

"It's okay. We talked over datapad when he was at Mom and Dad's and I was still aboard ship. Can't wait to see him, though. I don't think I'll still be here by the time he gets back."

Willis quirked an eyebrow at her. "How long are you planning on staying?"

"A few weeks, maybe. I figure I can help you with the kids while you mount your comeback."

"And the Navy's letting you?"

She shrugged. "I had the leave time accrued and got it cleared. Won't be a problem if it's not one for you."

"Of course not, little sis," Willis said with a smile. "We'd love to have you."

She smiled back. "Good. Because I â€" "

Just then the front door chimed, startling them both. Through the sliding glass door they watched the kids' ears perk up, too, as they froze in their places on the carpet, looking out at their dad to see what to do.

Willis glanced at his sister with a half-grin at the kids' reactions as he got up. "I guess that's my cue."

He was still wearing an amused expression when he opened the doorâ€|and his heart sank in an instant.

"Jamie!" he called before he addressed the man and woman in uniform in front of him. "Take the kids outside for a sec, okay?"

He didn't wait to hear his sister's answer. His started feeling lightheaded and felt like he couldn't breathe, but he tried. "Captain," he acknowledged. "Sergeant."

The man and woman in dress uniform nodded back. "Major Hawk, sir. Sorry to disturb you. We'd like to â€" "

Willis ran a nervous hand over his short hair. "Look, whatever it is, whatever's happened to my wife or my little brother, just tell me."

The woman nodded and took in a deep breath. "Your wife, Lieutenant Colonel Natalie Cooper, has been wounded in action, sir. The details are still forthcoming, but we're told she's recovering and out of danger now. You'll understand we still needed to make the official notification regardless."

Hawk felt the air slowly leave his lungs as he sagged in relief. Cooper was hurt but okay. That explained the long delay in communication as well. "Yes. I understand. Thanks for letting me know, Captain."

"Have a good day, sir."

As soon as he shut the door again he turned around and closed his eyes, leaning back against it. Yet another close call. \_Jesus, Coop,\_ he thought to himself. \_You have to stop doing this to me. And to them,\_ he added when he opened his eyes to see a wide-eyed Gabe, Liam, and Liv staring at him in confusion.

"Dad?" Gabriel asked in a quivering voice. "Is Mom okay?" He knew what uniforms at the house meant, even if his younger siblings didn't.

"She's fine, guys," Willis answered with a small reassuring smile. He opened up the notification letter he'd just been sent on his datapad and quickly scanned through it. "She got hurt a couple weeks ago, but she's in stable condition now."

Olivia frowned. "What does 'stable' mean, Daddy?"

"It means your mom's getting better. Come here."

Willis pulled his three kids in for a big hug, one that Jamie joined in on the other side.

"It'll be all right," Hawk said placidly to his family. "We'll get through this."

## 27. Chapter 26: Rerouted

**\*\*Chapter Twenty-Six: Rerouted\*\***

**\*\*1907 Hours, August 6, 2558. Forerunner Shield World Surface, Requiem. "The Search," Epoloch System. Day Eighteen of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

The outskirts of the perimeter had taken days to clean up after the fight. There'd been an official collection of the bodies of the dead, a new OP set up, and a painstaking replacement of mines all along the cratered area that had once been the entrance. Major Harris's engineers â€" once mine â€" took on the brunt of the work, patching up some of the outer wall that had seen the worst, as well as reinstalling other defenses here and there. In the meantime Major Delaney kept his 904th Infantry Battalion on watch along with the original contingent, headed by Captain Diaz, while Major Brewer and I determined what to do next.

"This is a tough spot we're in, ma'am," Brewer was saying. "We've got the manpower but as long as we're only using it to rotate the watch and patrols, we're not going to get anywhere."

"I agree," I replied, folding my arms across my chest as I glanced over at the hologram of our nearby sectors inside the command tent. "If we stay here this'll turn into another battle of attrition like the first. Both sides'll just keep grinding each other down until they're spent, but we won't have a firm upper hand to really establish our presence here, like HighCom wants. We need to go on the offensive. Start hitting the Storm and the Prometheans where it hurts so they won't come back."

Lieutenant Lloyd, also part of the impromptu meeting, met my gaze. "Do we have the numbers for that, Colonel? After what happened?"

"Yes. The tricky part is going to be making sure the outpost stays well-manned in our absence. We keep getting hit day after day, so we can't just leave a bare-bones crew watching Xavier." I frowned. "We're going to have to split our forces and take one battalion out."

"Whose, ma'am?" my XO asked.

"Delaney's. I need Harris's boys here to take care of anything that needs to be fixed, and Brewer, I'll need your Marines on defense and you to run the show here while I'm gone."

The redheaded major's eyebrows went up in surprise. "You're going back out, Colonel?"

The twin spots in my upper stomach where the needler rounds had gone in â€" yet miraculously hadn't exploded â€" still ached from time to time, but weren't hurting so bad that it was keeping me up at night anymore. I knew it was early for me to get back on the horse, but it had to happen sometime, and I was anxious to get this mission done. I nodded. "Yeah. I'm curious to see what's out there. We still haven't gone through Sector B yet."

Lloyd and Ethan, who'd remained quiet till now, exchanged a glance before my ex spoke up.

"Actually, ma'am, that's not entirely true."

I raised an eyebrow at him, more questioning than Brewer. "Care to enlighten us, Commander?"

"Yes, ma'am. The lieutenant and I have been putting our feelers out this week, trying to get a better lay of the land for the regiment before they get sent further out again."

"Not necessary," I said, shaking my head. "We already know it's all jungle past the desert."

Ethan flashed me a smug grin. "I didn't mean the type of terrain, Colonel. I meant the kind of enemy."

Before I could respond, he walked up closer to the table where the projection was displayed and took it down, replacing it with his own from his datapad. "Here's what Lloyd and I cooked up while you've been busy housekeeping. A survey of what's in that jungle."

"And what did you find?" Brewer asked.

"Prometheans. Lots of them," Caleb answered, looking pensive.

"Exactly," Ethan went on. "We took a look at the pattern of their patrols, how many we saw, and how they were setup. If there were more Crawlers or Knights in a group, for example. And with that, we've come up with the probable location of their base of operations, so to speak."

I had to admit, I was impressed. "Very good work, you two. So what's the verdict?"

"It's a little deep into the jungle, ma'am, but we think it's here," Lloyd supplied, pointing to a pulsating red dot that suddenly appeared on the projection. "We have no way of knowing if it's actually there or not, nor how many Prometheans â€" or possibly Storm â€" we could expect to see inside. This is just an educated guess, but it's a hunch we're willing to bet on."

"I'll take it," I said. "A hunch is more than what we had to start with." I looked at both spooks in turn. "I want you two to continue working on this. In the meantime, Major Brewer and I will handle the logistics and planning of the assault. It might not happen right away, but we'll get the ball rolling for now. That's where I'd eventually like us to be. A more offensive force."

"Yes, ma'am," Ethan answered.

I looked at the three of them in turn. "Good. Then you've got your orders. Dismissed."

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><p>After picking up my rifle and helmet from a table inside the command tent, I followed Major Brewer and the spooks outside and geared up, getting ready to go look for Captain Diaz on the lines. The former acting outpost commander, Major Hillary Rosa, had just regained consciousness three days ago. It was good news and boded well for her physical prognosis, but now that she'd had a few days' recovery time, I had to give her the news about their punishment.<p>

Yesterday I'd used the COM console in my quarters to contact another local outpost commander, explaining that I had a recovering major I needed to transfer over for an infraction. With my regiment's arrival we had an abundance of majors on hand already, and I had taken over command of the outpost; Diaz we could still use on the lines and to consult for information on what he'd been experiencing around here before we'd come planetside. Rosa would likely have to remain here for another week or so until she was well enough to be moved, but as soon as that happened, she'd be taking the next Pelican ride out.

I caught the first noncom I encountered on perimeter watch and had him summon Diaz for me. The Marine captain jogged up to my position, looking a little wary, but the lines weren't exactly a good place to talk. Instead I gestured to him and said, "Walk with me, Tanner."

"Yes, ma'am."

Once we'd started moving back in the direction of the quad, Diaz said, "May I ask what this is about, Colonel?"

"I've made a decision about you and Major Rosa now that she's awake. She'll be getting transferred to Outpost Loreda soon, maybe within the week if Doc clears her." I gave him a look, something between rueful and stern. "I'm sorry. But I think you both knew when you started this that this is how it would end."

The captain nodded slowly, like he'd known it was coming and had already come to terms with it as best he could. "Yes, ma'am. We knew. But sometimesâ€|you can't help what you feel."

"If you want to go say your goodbyes, now's the time. You won't be allowed back in to see her after this."

Diaz nodded again and I watched as he swallowed hard. "I understand, Colonel. I'm guessing this whole mess has gone through the official channels by now?"

"I've submitted a report about it, yes. It'll be noted on both your CSVs in a few days."

"Right."

"Tannerâ€|be careful next time. The Corps is very forgiving about battlefield romances done the right way. But never with this."



"I know." He released a sigh. "I'll do better, ma'am. I'm not a bad Marine, even if I showed poor judgment in my personal attachments. I don't want my career to go down the drain because of this."

"It won't, and you're a capable leader. You just got in over your head."

Captain Diaz nodded a third time before meeting my gaze. "Well, I guess I'll be in the medtent then, Colonel. Thank you."

As I watched him walk off I wondered if he'd be okay after today. Although his relationship with Rosa had been wrong, I could tell it had been real " and deeply felt.

A Marine mourning the loss of a love had plenty to be distracted about. But I suppose I'd known when I'd first found out about this story between them that it was never going to end in a pleasant way. At least he could be happy that against the odds, she'd survived.

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><p>Now that the day's tasks were in motion, I spent another moment looking over everything inside the command tent " a real-time hologram of my battalions' positions; an indicator of the current patrol routes; and a constantly updating scroll of numbers denoting unit sizes, coordinates, and logistical information " until I'd seen enough to know things were on track. Before returning out on the lines to gauge how morale was among the Marines, I decided to retreat to my quarters and finally call Willis.<p>

He answered on the fourth ring, obviously from sleep.  
"Natalie?"

"Hey, Will. Sorry to wake you. This is the first chance I've gotten to check in again and I'm not sure when it'll come back around. How are you guys holding up?"

"Okay," he answered, and I could hear him moving to sit up in bed. "Better now that I'm hearing your voice. We had some uniforms come to the door the other day to tell us you'd been wounded. Got everybody on edge."

I smiled faintly. "Don't worry. I'm more or less in one piece still."

"What happened?"

"We were out on patrol when your brother got the bright idea to rush in the middle of the crossfire to throw a grenade," I said, vividly recalling the incident. My mostly-healed wound responded by throbbing a little more. "He tripped over something on the way back to cover and I knew he might not make it. So I ran over to help him up, and I got two needler rounds jabbed into my side, just beneath my ribcage. Hurt like hell."

"Christ! Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. The rounds must've malfunctioned or something because they didn't explode." \_Otherwise my insides would be minced meat, and I'd

be very, very dead, \_I added to myself. "I got lucky."

"Yes, you did." He sighed on the other end. "Coop, I've told you before, you need to be more careful out there. For us and for you. You should've seen the look on Gabe's face when we got the notification team at the door. Poor kid got rattled like he thought his nightmare was coming true. I can't—we can't take this kind of stuff anymore."

For some reason that irked me. "And what do you think I should've done instead then, Will? Let your brother die?"

"No, but —" "

"Willis, I do \_everything\_ I can to stay alive. Everything. I know you and the kids are home waiting for me. I know you worry. I know you don't want me getting hurt. But I still have a job to do, and I'm not just going to sit by while one of my Marines gets killed if I can do something about it. Even if it's not Matt, which it was."

"I get that," he snapped. "But remember that you can't help your Marines if you're dead. And we need you, too."

I shut my eyes for a minute and massaged my temple, trying to rid myself of the beginnings of a headache. This conversation had gone downhill fast. "I'm not going to argue this with you right now, Will. I've got a million different shitty scenarios we're dealing with out here and I don't —" "

"Why haven't you told me about Ethan?"

The question came out of the blue and startled me. "What?"

"I heard he might still be alive. And that he's working out there with you. Is that true?"

"Yes," I responded instantly. "Why?"

"\_Why?\_ You don't think I'd want to know something like that? I thought he was dead!"

"So did I!" I shouted back, getting angrier now at his persistence. "How do you think I felt when I saw him? Knowing I had to be around the guy for the rest of the mission? Orders are orders and I don't have a choice!"

"I know that. But you should've told me."

"I tried to, the first time we talked! You got a call and had to leave!" I took a deep breath to temper my next words. "Please don't act like I'm purposely trying to keep this from you. There's no need. He may have changed, but it's still Ethan. I don't trust a word he —" "

"You've talked to him? After what he did to you? Really?"

It was my turn to sigh. "I tried to pass him off to my XO. I didn't want anything to do with him, believe me. But circumstances—it's just easier if I include him in things. Despite who he is, and who he used to be—I have to say he does his job as a spook right."

My husband snorted at that. "Just don't get caught up in his bullshit again. Whatever he's like now, you know how he is. He puts on appearances and makes it seem like it's all good, and then he strikes." There was a pause. "I don't know what he's been saying to you, but I wouldn't trust that he's all that different now."

I couldn't help the humorless grin that came to my face. "Honey, I know. I dated the guy for over a year before I met you. He can say he's changed all he wants, and to an extent I think he has, but that doesn't erase the past. I'm still wary of his real intentions."

"Good. He doesn't deserve your trust. Or your forgiveness."

"That he'll never have." I glanced down absently at my boots, glad the conversation had smoothed over a little now. "He did save me the other night, though. Our outpost was attacked and with my wound and everythingâ€¦I wasn't in a good place to help myself. So at least he's earning his keep."

Willis didn't respond to that, so I went on.

"He said some things about Matthew, too. That we should be careful since he used to be a rebel."

"Careful of what?"

"That he could be using us."

Willis sighed again. "I hate to say that crossed my mind, in the beginning. He's my brother, always will be, but he was also gone from home for so long and grew up in a completely different environment all those yearsâ€¦it's hard not to wonder. But he's been nothing but a decent kid, and you know I would never, ever let him near the kids if I didn't think he was solid."

"I know."

There was a moment of silence then before my husband spoke once more.

"Just stay safe, Coop. I miss you, and so do Gabe and the twins. We want our colonel-in-training home again soon."

I smiled for real this time. "Thanks. Me, too."

"I love you."

"I love you, too." I thought of something else then. "How's your therapy going, by the way?"

"I'm finally starting to improve a bit. We'll see how it goes. Jamie just took some leave and has been staying here with us the past couple days, helping with the kids. She says she should be here a few weeks. It's nice to have the company."

"That's great." I checked my watch and knew it was time to get going again, much as I didn't want to. "Say hi to the kids for me in the morning, and tell them I miss them and love them very much."

"Will do, honey."

"All right. I'll try to call again when I can. Bye."

"Bye."

I leaned back in my chair once the connection cut and sat there a moment, taking it all in. Willis was frustrated with my current setting, as was I, but for now neither of us could do anything about it. The best thing for me to do was to keep on task so I could see the people I loved again.

## 28. Chapter 27: Caution Ahead

Author's Note: Well, after a brief hiatus, I'm back. Hope you enjoy, and of course there's lots more to come. :)

Also...Merry (almost) Christmas!

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><p><span><strong>Chapter Twenty-Seven: Caution Ahead<strong>

\*\*0956 Hours, August 25, 2558. Forerunner Shield World Surface, Requiem. "The Jungle," Epoloch System. Day Thirty-Seven of the War of Tomorrow\*\*

"Well, Doctor Leedom? Anything yet?"

I stood beside the scientist dressed in full gear, my battle rifle slung diagonally behind my back with my arms folded across my chest. Ever since the mission on Khan, things had been chilly between us, mostly due to the fact that by the end, she'd been using her passing acquaintance with my late mother to manipulate me - something I hadn't let slide and had said as much to her face. The real kicker, however, had been her callous mention of my miscarriage, and after that all bets were off.

Calling her out on her behavior had been the right move, but it hadn't exactly endeared us to one another. Where I'd once seen her as a chance to get to know more about my mom's final years since the War had forced my family apart, I now saw only a brilliant nuisance of a woman who was just as incendiary as she was helpful - and ready to do more harm than good if she thought she'd get some extra research time out of it. Bearing that in mind, I'd kept her current task purposely short and simple: she was helping us look for clues that would find us the Promethean hideout.

Much to my dismay, though, she only shook her head in response.

"I'm sorry, Colonel. Nothing yet." She looked pensively down at the wreckage of a couple of lone Watchers we'd encountered, oddly without a Knight in tow. "These scraps of metal don't tell me anything. So far, the Prometheans strike me as strange constructs; they don't function on orders in the traditional sense. Not that we can see, anyway."

I nodded to the thing's eye, chewed up by bullets but still

recognizable as its central piece. "What about that? Isn't it like its brain or a server or something? No info stored in there?"

Leedom shrugged. "I'm not sure. The techs you provided me with were unable to extract anything of value from it. Perhaps if I'd had more time and more qualified assistants..."

"You'd make some crack about my mom, or my kid, so I'd let you stay here and dawdle all day while my outpost gets pounded," I finished, none too kindly. "If there's nothing here for you to take, let's get moving. We've just barely crossed into Sector B territory. I'm sure there'll be more robot parts for you to sift through further in."

The scientist glanced up at me, flustered. "Cooper, you are not the professional I thought - "

"No, you aren't. You threw professional out the window when you brought up personal shit to me to get me to bend on Khan. Well I'm not. We move."

It didn't make me feel good to be this way, but I knew it's how it had to be. If I showed hesitation, Leedom would take that as an invitation to make her case to stay. And out here, with limited resources, manpower, and cover, that was something I couldn't afford. We were here to find out where the bulk of the Prometheans were coming from, and how we could strike their prime point before they came after us again. It had taken more than a few weeks, but we'd finally put enough pieces together to get started on a plan of assault. And the first thing we needed to do was get a confirmation on location - and a good look at what they were hiding.

I was headed back to the head of the formation, security detail around me, when Ethan suddenly butted into the circle.

"Now that's definitely not the Natalie Cooper I remember," he said with a sly grin on his face. "You're right. You've grown a solid pair since high school."

For some reason, even out here in the jungle, I snorted a laugh. "Let's just say I've learned how to deal with difficult people."

"Part of being in charge, right? Take stock of strengths and weaknesses in your ranks, and find a way to pull it all together for a successful mission."

I gave him a look. "And when's the last time you led anything other than a small ONI team, Ethan?"

My ex released a sigh. "Never. Just something I picked up from Dad."

"Mm. Full of gems, that guy."

The spook rolled his eyes. "I'll concede that most of the time he approached things the wrong way. I didn't appreciate someone taking the fall for me in that Flood op, for example, which you already know. But still, he didn't make full colonel on hijinks alone. Hard to believe maybe, but my dad was actually, genuinely good at some

things."

"Not that many of those translated well to his son."

Ethan let a second, frustrated sigh. "Are we back to this again?"

"You beat me to a pulp over nothing, Ethan. If you think I'm going to conveniently forget about that one day, you're wrong. I might look past it for a moment, push it aside for the mission, whatever, but it'll always be in the back of my head." I paused to give him a look. "That's how I'll always remember you."

Putting his hands up in surrender, he shook his head. "Yes, ma'am. Fine. But I won't stop trying to change your mind."

He pushed towards the front then without another word, working his way deeper into the left flank of Marines until I couldn't see him anymore past the dense jungle vegetation. I wondered if my words had hurt him somehow, but reminded myself that I shouldn't care. He certainly hadn't when he'd had my blood on his fists and left bruises on my face all those years ago.

Imitating the rest, I shook my head to clear it and moved on.

\* \* \*

><p>This deep in the jungle, I was sure we'd find something shortly. I was surprised by the distinct lack of resistance getting to this point, thinking we should have run into more than a handful of Prometheans in the last two hours of walking. Part of me was grateful we hadn't, but the other, experienced part told me this wasn't normal. There had to be something more in Sector B we hadn't seen yet.<p>

"Ma'am?" It was Delaney via COM. I responded quickly, knowing he was up at the head of the formation.

"Go ahead, Major."

"There's...something odd here. I'd want you to see it but I'm not sure it's safe. Sending you a live feed now."

I waited for the stream to come through on my HUD. I halted my march and my security detail did the same, enveloping me in a loose circle as they kept a lookout for enemy activity while I watched.

Delaney's camera was pointed down into the thick underbrush when the clip began to play. At first I couldn't see much through the foliage, but then the Marine major crouched down to get a better look at a glinting object. It looked like a pulsating light, and he framed the image for a second, then stood and jogged down to another one several feet away. There, another blinking light was revealed between the undergrowth.

"Lights," I said.

"Yes, ma'am. Thoughts?"

My mind immediately went to something dangerous. "Could they be an

explosive of some kind?"

"Not sure, Colonel, but I'd say if they were, they should've detonated by now. My first time around I didn't even notice them under all the leaves and stuff. My aide showed them to me. If they were close proximity mines or a trip wire or anything like that, we would've already been cooked."

The explanation made sense, but just in case, I wasn't willing to risk it. Our outpost and the Marine forces here on Requiem in general had been through enough without losing another top-ranking officer. "Delaney, divert the remainder of your Marines. Give them a new path to follow via HUD so they don't walk by the lights. You keep a safe distance, too. There's no telling what they could be, so don't tempt fate."

"Yes, ma'am. Moving now."

As soon as the connection cut I frowned as I straightened, starting to forge ahead again myself. I nearly jumped out of my skin when Ethan reappeared beside me again, wearing a bemused expression.

"You know, my first guess about the lights wouldn't be that they're mines, Natalie. They look more like markers."

"Yeah? Of what?" I asked in irritation. "'Here lies my secret base, come get me'? Why would they be that careless?"

Ethan refrained from rolling his eyes. "If you think about it, most species would need some sort of visual reminder of where something is. Maybe even the Prometheans. And to their credit, the lights were well hidden. Major Delaney was lucky he had such an observant aide keeping an eye out for him."

"So you think that's where the Promethean base might be? Somewhere up ahead?"

He nodded. "Or below ground. Either's possible."

"Okay. Then let's - "

An incoming orb of hot green plasma interrupted what I'd been about to say. It hit the ground only several meters off from where we stood, decimating the foliage as it made the earth quake.

My heart pounded in my chest as I lost my balance, quickly recovered, and flipped open the COM. "Marines, status!"

"Ma'am, we've got wounded!" Delaney answered back.

"Shit. How many?"

"A fireteam from third platoon, Alpha Company, Colonel. Two dead, three injured."

"Son of a - "

"Cooper, they're taking another shot!"

I glanced up just in time to see my security detail rushing forward,

trying to take care of the threat before it landed right on top of us, but that wasn't going to happen. The next orb was coming in too fast, and the only one close enough to do anything about it was Ethan. He propelled me forward with a hard shove, making me stumble yet again before I caught myself and hauled ass out of the way, gesturing for my men to do the same.

It all happened so fast that I didn't even really have time to digest what I was seeing till after the second plasma round had hit. But what I'd just witnessed from my ex was something I never thought he'd do.

In the moment, to my surprise, he hadn't thought at all of himself. Instead, he'd gotten me out of the way just in time, and forced my security detail away as well. All while he hadn't moved a muscle...just so everyone else would be safe.

Which was why he was lying moaning on the jungle floor now, scorch marks all over his black fatigues, helmet, and armor - and blood trickling worryingly from underneath his chin.

"Ethan!"

In that instant I wasn't even thinking really, just reacting to the fact that one of my men was hurt and needed help. I keyed the COM a second time as I ran, hailing the major again. "Delaney, get me a bead on that heavy weapon! I want that fuel rod cannon gone \_now\_, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

By then I'd gotten to Ethan's side and I dropped my weapon on the ground in front of me, using both hands to steady the sides of his helmet, pulse pounding. "Doc, I need you here right now!" I cried into a separate channel. Then, aloud, I said, "Ethan? Can you hear me?"

He didn't respond at first, only groaned and attempted to move his head a bit. I held my grasp firm, not wanting him to do more damage. Thanks to some advanced classes I'd had while I'd been at War College, I knew a little more on how to effectively respond to a field trauma while waiting for the medic to arrive. Apparently the topic had been designated as a useful lesson for when top officers got stuck in an ambushed convoy and help was too far off.

I tried again.

"Ethan? It's Cooper. If you're conscious, I need you to - "

"'M awake," he muttered loudly, though his speech was slurred. "W-wha - "

"You got hit pretty close by a round from a fuel rod cannon. Take it easy. Doc's on his way now."

Reynolds thankfully appeared shortly, bounding through the chaos of the firefight that had erupted throughout the jungle. He crouched down beside Ethan and me without a word and gently nudged me aside.



"I've got it, ma'am. Thanks for keeping him steady. That'll help."

"No problem," I replied, rising once more and taking my gun in hand, but otherwise staying put to see how things turned out. "How bad does it look, Michael?"

"Don't know yet. Let's get his helmet off."

Per Doc's orders, I got behind Ethan and crouched down again, gripping his shoulders as Reynolds carefully eased his helmet off. From there we could see where the blood was coming from - a cut on the right side of his temple, just beneath his hair line. It didn't look too bad, but I knew from having had numerous head injuries myself that that wasn't always the worst part. His nose was bleeding from the harsh impact, too, and it looked slightly skewed on his face.

"Broken nose," I said before the medic could. "How bad's his head?"

"Give me one, Colonel." Reynolds pulled out his penlight from his pants pocket and drew up one of Ethan's eyelids, then the other, shining the light in. "Commander Ackerson, do you know where you're at right now?"

True to form, Ethan scoffed, the noise coming out rough from his hurt nose. I saw him wince but he replied, "'M fine. Not...idiot. 'M...on Req..."

"That's right, sir. How are you feeling? Are you in pain?"

Ethan's expression contorted even more now into an angry one. "'Course! 'Splosion...fucked...e up."

"Yup. Your pretty face took a hit," I said, wearing a small smirk since he looked to be in one piece. "But I think you're still mobile."

For a second he seemed confused when I spoke. "'Atalie?"

"Yes, but remember that's 'ma'am' to you," I answered as I squeezed his shoulder. "But you saved me again, Ackerson, so I'd say we're good."

\* \* \*

><p>While Ethan got patched up, I decided to leave things in Doc Reynolds's capable hands and got back to the rest of my Marines. Major Delaney notified me shortly that the initial launcher had been taken care of, but more and more Storm troops were coming through the vegetation now, making me think the spook's earlier idea had been correct - somewhere close by was the Promethean base we'd been searching for. But where -<p>

"Ma'am, these bastards are a little more persistent than we'd expected," Delaney said via COM. "Permission to engage our own heavy weapons?"

I'd initially given orders to keep our heaviest explosives for when

we reached the base itself, since we had only a battalion's worth with us and getting more would prove problematic and time-consuming. Yet it was becoming clear from the skirmish that it was needed this moment, and, against my better judgment, I decided to trust Ethan and his assessment that we'd likely already arrived at our objective.

"All right, Major," I responded. "Let's bring on the heat and shut the Remnant down."

"Yes, ma'am."

The jungle morphed then from a thick, tangled mass of greenery into a war zone, plants and people and aliens and terrain all getting ripped apart on both sides. Although I knew I shouldn't, I moved up ahead with my security detail as well, always itching to be at the front, aiding where I could. I kept up a steady stream of fire from my BR85HB SR and brought down two Jackals with headshots, several Grunts and an Elite before changing spots, running ahead of Staff Sergeant Derek Lynch and the rest.

With the introduction of our heavy weapons into the fray, blood and bodies littered the jungle floor in an impressive amount of time, but I saw with relief that most of it was the enemy's and not ours. It gave the Marines hope as I shouted additional orders through the COM, verbally moving the men as I physically continued relocating myself so as not to get hit. We were down a spook now, at least for a while, and I didn't want Delaney's 904th Infantry Batt to be down a commander, too.

I shouldn't have worried, though. Lynch was an experienced Marine and had my back, pulling a grenade off his belt as I ducked to reload and tossing it into the maelstrom, creating even more havoc where there was already plenty of it. Jungle plants and ex-Covie parts went flying through the air, and then I heard the wailing of a dying Elite go out. It was pretty clear that we were now winning; we just needed to end it.

"Push harder, Marines!" I yelled over the COM. "Let's finish this!"

There was a final surge of activity while we dealt with the surprise addition of the formidable Remnant force, and then, almost suddenly, silence. The last of the alien bastards were either killed or retreated into the dense foliage, seemingly giving up. It was puzzling at first until I realized that if they'd left, they had good reason to - and we should remain on our toes.

"Great work, everyone," I said over the radio when the combat had settled. "Major Delaney, let the scientists know we're on the move again. We need to redouble our efforts at finding this place. Our spook thinks it's somewhere in the immediate area and I'm inclined to agree."

"Acknowledged, Colonel," the major replied. "If I may ask, how is the lieutenant commander?"

I released a heavy sigh, a little unsure of that myself. "He was injured but not too badly off when I left him. I'm sure Doc's taking good care of him."

Now that the situation was stable again it was about time I checked in. Ethan wasn't normally my concern, but I'd felt bad he'd been hurt, and more so since it'd been because of me. Maybe that didn't make much sense given our history, but in that moment - and others before today, if I were being honest with myself - he'd proven to be surprisingly selfless when it was needed, and looked out for more than just himself. It was a different Ethan than the one I'd known for sure...and maybe even one I could grow to be okay with.

## 29. Chapter 28: Extract

### \*\*Chapter Twenty-Eight: Extract\*\*

The density of the jungle didn't make it easy to get a good look around, especially when we didn't know exactly what we were even looking for to begin with. We at least knew about the markers now, though, and I made sure my Marines and I kept a safe distance while searching the perimeter. I felt in my gut that Ethan was right about this. We'd already found the Prometheans' lair - we just couldn't see it.

"It's got to be below ground," I murmured to myself after another good forty minutes of looking. Frowning, I added, "But where?"

I'd just glanced down at my boots, contemplating the ground beneath them, when Major Delaney's voice flooded my helmet.

"Ma'am, you left the channel open."

"Sorry, Delaney," I replied quickly. "Just thinking aloud."

"About that Promethean hideout?"

"Yeah. I feel like if it were above ground we would've noticed it already."

"I tend to agree, Colonel, but I don't see any hidden caves or slopes. What's our next move?"

"Standby, Major. Let me get a hold of our spook and see how he's doing."

I cut the connection then and went off to find Doc, probably somewhere deeper in the formation checking on patients from the skirmish. I hadn't heard much about Ethan in the last half hour or so, but I was hoping he was aware enough now to give me some advice.

Thanks to my time on Khan I knew how crafty both the Prometheans and ex-Covenant could be when it came to an area close to their heart. There, deep in the Outer Colonies, they'd used a series of underground tunnels that ultimately connected to a portal chamber to get around Qamar Island quickly - and to easily flank and even infiltrate our lines a few times. I wasn't sure what to expect out here on new turf, but Khan had taught me enough of a lesson to be on my guard always.

Eventually I found Doc Reynolds near an inner perimeter surrounded by

two squads of Marines with several wounded lying in the center. I guessed this was set up in lieu of a medtent while we were out on patrol, and the medic looked to be doing his best to get everyone he could up on their feet again to either continue on, or be sent back to base with a small escort. Two of the injured Marines seemed like they'd be doing neither anytime soon.

Trying to keep my face impassive amongst the wounded, I walked up to Reynolds and said, "Doc, where'd you put my spook? I don't see him."

The seasoned corpsman gave me a sharp glance, but the slight humor in his eyes told me he wasn't too upset. "It seems you have a copycat, ma'am. Couldn't get him to stay put long enough to get him healed up, either. He's up already, although he's still complaining of a headache and dizziness." He paused. "I'd tell you to see what you could do to convince him to lay low for a bit, but I know that's not your strong suit yourself."

A flicker of a grin crossed my face. "You know me, Michael. As long as I'm not unconscious or bleeding out, it's up and at 'em. I'll see if I can track him down."

The "up and at 'em" part was a little harder now that I'd had a couple of needler rounds go through my upper stomach a few weeks back, but I tried my best to ignore the occasional wave of pain and kept on.

My ex was perched on a gradual rise in the jungle, one of the only parts of the landscape around here that wasn't totally flat. I could tell he was concentrating on something in his HUD, from the way he didn't even move a muscle as I approached. For a minute I contemplated scaring the shit out of him since he was so engrossed, but then remembered how he'd risked his life for the rest of us not to long ago - and injured himself in the process - so I let it go.

"What's so interesting up there, Ethan?" I asked via COM, announcing my presence before stepping forward. "Doesn't look like much of a view."

"You'd be wrong, then."

"Yeah? Show me."

He finally moved a bit and I was soon watching a live feed from his helmet cam, while my security detail surrounded us and kept tabs on the area. He turned his head slowly from left to right, giving me the same visual he was receiving, but I couldn't see anything of worth there. I frowned.

"Just more jungle? This is what you ran away from Doc for?"

"He told you?"

I snorted. "Of course he did. I've practically patented the 'sneak off from the medtent' move."

He chuckled lightly through our private channel. "Wish I could say I'm surprised, Cooper, but I'm not. Look closer."

I tried again and strained to see beyond the thick vegetation this time, giving my full attention to the feed. Then I saw it - a diagonal gray structure protruding from the fronds several meters away.

"The hideout," I said. The helmet cam video cut out then and I saw Ethan shake his head.

"We don't know that yet, Colonel. But I'd say it's worth a look."

\* \* \*

><p>With Ethan and my security team in tow, led by Staff Sergeant Lynch, I ordered the closest Marine company to move up to the structure with us to see what we could find. I specifically told Major Delaney to stay back in case anything happened to me, so that the remainder of the 904th Battalion would still have its leader intact if the worst hit. The closer we got to the place, though, the more uneasy I felt. There was still no resistance.<p>

"Seems like they forgot to bring out the welcome wagon, ma'am," Lynch said to me over the COM. "Orders?"

"We keep going, Staff. Enemies or no, we need to check this place out."

Even so I crept forward cautiously, anxiously awaiting a fierce firefight to break out. None came. When we were finally close enough to the diagonal structures to see that they were tall ramps of some sort, some with tiny rooms underneath to search through and others made simply of hard, solid material, there \_still\_ weren't any hostile forces to contend with.

"Something's wrong," Ethan said, walking up beside me. I heard him make a small grunt of pain - from the headache or his broken nose, I couldn't be sure - before he continued. "If this was the Prometheans' base, they should've been out here in force. And I don't see any entryway yet."

"Right here, sir," Staff Sergeant Lynch called out behind us before I could respond. "Think we found it."

Ethan and I both rushed over to see. Gripping my battle rifle tight in my hands, I moved up to where my aide crouched by a doorway, just below one of the uninviting gray structures.

"It's already lit," I remarked, surprised. Without meaning to, I exchanged a glance with the spook.

"Yes, ma'am," Ethan replied. "The Prometheans are expecting us."

\* \* \*

><p>As we trudged down the wide ramp and into the structure, it struck me that it didn't feel all that different from walking down the ancient steps into the underground chamber on Qamar Island back on Khan. It felt similar enough that I shivered, knowing what a fierce battle we'd fought just outside of it. If this was where the Prometheans were housed, I didn't even want to think about what that

meant.<p>

"Natalie? You okay?"

I turned to find Ethan on my flank yet again, holding his weapon to bear but looking sideways at me, wondering at my mental status. I swallowed and gave a slow nod, choosing not to remember that on Khan, I'd nearly lost my younger brother to something like this.

"I'm holding up," I answered without taking my eyes off what was in front of us. "You? Less than an hour ago you got your head rattled. Pretty damn hard, I might add."

My ex released a sigh. "I'm not a hundred percent, if that's what your asking. But I'm fine enough and, obviously, my speech patterns have improved." I heard what had to be the beginnings of a smirk forming on his face. "You seemed fairly distressed about my situation for a while there. If I recall correctly, I even heard you say I'd messed up my 'pretty face'."

"\_You\_ said that, I just added the adjective. And trust me, being called a 'pretty boy' isn't always something to be taken as a compliment."

"No, but I think you meant it that way. You're still into me. Physically, at least. I can tell. You blushed when I first saw you on the \_Onward Journey\_, too."

Once again my cheeks went red beneath my helmet, but I wasn't about to let that show in any way he could notice - and especially not in my voice. "Ethan," I ground out, "don't ruin whatever goodwill you've established by playing the hero. I appreciate what you did for me and the others back there, but the rest is - "

\_Ancient history\_, was what I'd been about to say, only a Promethean Watcher prevented me from doing so.

"Drones!" I suddenly shouted into the general channel. "Open fire!"

I followed my own order and so did Ethan, both of us angling our weapons up and letting loose a tight burst of rifle fire that ended in the Watcher's quick demise. That didn't give us any time to regroup, though, because coming up behind it was another...followed fast by a Knight and a horde of Crawlers.

"Ma'am, watch the front!" Staff Sergeant Lynch yelled at me, rapidly moving to protect me and spraying the oncoming Prometheans with lead. In seconds his SAW ate up the entryway, sending the second Watcher exploding out of the air and onto the ground in sparking pieces, while the Knight pushed its way forward beneath it.

When a light round whizzed uncomfortably close to my head, I thought the Knight was just taking potshots to see what it could hit now that it's twin guards were down, but when I heard the pained shout behind me, I realized something had hit. One of the enlisted Marines in Delaney's company, moving with us, had taken a round to the chestplate. He was on the ground, grasping at his torso and wheezing at the burn, before anyone even knew he was there.

"Doc!" I immediately cried into the radio. "We've got - !"

"Colonel, don't bother! He's dead!"

It was Ethan. He'd already crouched down to feel for the Marine's pulse and apparently found none. But I always wanted Reynolds's opinion before I gave up on one of my men.

"I'll still get help," I said. "Maybe Doc can do something."

"Are you insane? Why tie up the area for one guy? He's fucking dead, Natalie. He's not coming back. We need to push on."

I shot a look at Ethan, unable to believe his sudden attitude change after what I'd seen him do an hour ago to save my hide - and that of most of my security detail.

Or maybe it was a sentiment from him I remembered all too well. I could tell from his posture as well as his voice that he was dead serious.

Whatever changes he'd made, the old Ethan - like he'd mentioned before - hadn't been completely wiped off the map.

The thought distracted me, but not enough that I wasn't involved in what was still going on around us. Getting this close up to death had a way of demanding your attention, and I continued to fire off burst after burst from my rifle even as my mind swirled with thoughts of the dead Marine and Ethan's complex renaissance of his conscience. As Crawlers spilled up the ramp in a seemingly endless wave, more and more of the heavy lifting went to my aide and the other Marines, whose rapidly firing assault weapons were better suited to the task.

In short order the scene settled, however, and once again I was left to marvel at just how fast a skirmish could end - even if it sometimes felt like an eternity during the fight. With the encounter over, I took a moment to steady my heavy breathing and then jogged back to the downed Marine, checking for a pulse myself while my security kept watch.

Ethan was right. He was dead.

I found him standing over me when I glanced up before I stood.

"Satisfied? I told you he was gone. You're wasting time."

At that I bristled. "I'm not. He's a fellow Marine, Ethan. If he had any fucking chance at all, we owed it to him to try."

"The dead don't get chances anymore, Natalie. And we don't have time for unmoving bodies. He's no help to us now and he doesn't need any in return. Best to just go."

"What is wrong with you?" I cried out angrily, the words escaping of their own volition. "What if that was you? Wouldn't you want someone to give a shit?"

To my surprise - or maybe not - Ethan shrugged. "If that was me, I'd

be dead too, and probably no longer interested - or aware of - anything that was happening in the real world." He gave my shoulder a nudge for good measure. "Which is why we should continue, \_Colonel\_."

Before I let the anger get the best of me, I reluctantly trudged forward, motioning to the Marines and my detail to do the same. I waited for some of them to go ahead of me, but as Ethan came up, I made it a point to turn my back on him and followed the others into the hole in front of him.

\* \* \*

><p>When we hit bottom a short while later, it wasn't the lack of enemy presence again that was most startling. It was what we found.<p>

The ramp eventually opened up into a square room, somewhat different than the usual circular ones we were used to finding underground. Most of the walls were bare and I nearly let loose a sigh of relief for it, relishing the idea that this wasn't a room originally built for near-instantaneous travel like I thought it might be, but my peace of mind was short-lived. It was my aide who called out to me this time.

"Colonel, come see this."

I turned and, keeping my rifle tight against my torso armor, moved carefully to his position. The staff sergeant and a few others were standing in front of the far wall, opposite from the entrance. And even before he told me what he was seeing, I saw it, too - markings on the bulkhead.

"There's symbols," Lynch said.

"Shit. Like the ones we've found in other portal rooms," Ethan added as he approached. "So what we've been chasing all this time wasn't a hideout at all. It was this."

"Don't say that," I cut in. "Just...don't."

Ethan gave a bemused snort. "Even if I \_don't\_ point out the obvious, you already know. And it won't change what they are."

"Is it active?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders again. "Not sure, but the scientists'll know. We'll send them in."

It took nearly an hour to secure the area well enough to allow the scientists inside. And when we did, the nagging thought in the back of my mind finally became a disturbing reality. I felt the bile in my throat rise up.

"Colonel Cooper," Doctor Leedom began when she emerged, "we've just discovered another active portal to Earth."



## **\*\*Chapter Twenty-Nine: Dying From the Light\*\***

**\*\*1944 Hours, August 26, 2558. Forerunner Shield World Surface, Requiem. "The Deluge," Epiloch System. Day Thirty-Eight of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

I tore off my gloves as I walked through the quad back at the outpost, helmet placed carefully under one arm and battle rifle slung behind my back. It was chilly in the desert now that the sun had gone down over the horizon, and I couldn't wait to get back to my private quarters and just be alone. Now more than ever, I needed the break...and the solace.

\_Another fucking portal, going exactly where we don't want it to,\_ I thought to myself, more than a little downtrodden by the prospect. This was an abject failure on my part, something I couldn't have foreseen or have controlled, but a situation I had to contain nonetheless. And given the fact that the last time, I'd only barely managed to do so - and at the cost of over forty lives of the men and women I was in place to protect - it all just made my head spin.

"Welcome back, Colonel," Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd said to me as I passed. I almost didn't even notice him as I shoved my gloves into the bucket of my helmet. "How was the patrol? Did you find it?"

Instead of answering, I simply shook my head at him. "Not now, Cal. Major Delaney and Commander Ackerson can fill you in."

"Ma'am? Major Brewer has requested - "

"Your wife can wait, Lieutenant. I said \_not now\_."

Lloyd seemed perplexed by my reply and mood, but didn't say anything else. He just gave me a slight nod and I was on my way.

The way in which I'd spoken to my friend made me feel even worse, and I instantly felt like a bad commander for not taking care of my troops first. Yet at the moment, I just...couldn't.

And I realized now that there was a remedy for that. A remedy for all of this.

As soon as I got inside my room I dumped my pack, helmet, and gloves on the small desk by the bed, then pulled off my boots and shoved them off to the side. I carefully propped up my rifle beside them up against the wall, then quickly made my way over to the closet. I pulled out my bottle of brandy from Khan, silently blessing and cursing Javier Laraza for giving it to me, and poured myself a sizable glass of the amber liquid inside. I drank it down in one large swill, grimaced at the burn, then poured myself another before finally sitting down on the chair.

I took my time with the second cup, tilting it slightly sideways on the desk and contemplating the alcohol within it while my mind wandered. How could I have been so stupid, so \_naive\_, as to believe that the only portal to Earth I'd ever find was the one on Khan? The universe was an immense place; \_of course\_ there were more out there. And of course I'd find one right in our own backyard on my subsequent

deployment, one by all rights I shouldn't even have been on in the first place.

Sighing as I shook my head at the thought, I took another swig from my drink and let it do its work. I was nearing the point already where I could feel the liquid warmth suffusing my body, but not yet in any discernible way. \_That, at least, I can fix,\_ I thought.

But first things first. While I still had enough of a mind to do it, I went and flicked on my COM console - my link to my superiors on Earth - and typed out a hastily written report on what we'd found. A warning, of sorts. I wasn't so sure I'd be able to keep what we'd found exclusively here on Requiem. This could quickly spill over to the human homeworld - and my family's home. And if it did, I wanted everyone to be prepared.

I suddenly swallowed hard at that. If I failed here, my husband and kids could be in danger - not only the countless other billions of people who lived there. The pressure and memories of my nearly failed last attempt on Khan made me drink from my glass yet again.

I wasn't really sure how long I sat there, staring at the shut-down console and my close-to-empty tumbler, wondering what kind of nightmare future the cosmos had in store for us. As if I hadn't been through enough in my three decades of life already.

I couldn't even bring myself to look at the small family photo I had framed on the desk. It was just another reminder of how, no matter my increases in rank, I didn't have the ability to protect them all, to keep the galaxy's evils from ever touching them.

After a time I started to feel the effects of the drink and I leaned my head back in my chair and closed my eyes, breathing slow and deep. So this was why I'd always seen my higher-ups with hidden bottles of alcohol or lit cigars in their personal offices. It all made total sense to me now - commanding at these levels took a lot of guts, and plenty of lubrication to take your mind off what you had no business trying to tackle on your own, yet were ordered to handle on a daily basis.

I finally came out of my reverie when I heard a knock on my door - a series of them, actually. I sat up quickly, thinking it was my aide or maybe even Brewer come to talk to me about what had occurred, but I stopped in my tracks when I opened the door and saw Ethan.

"Hi," I blurted, not really in much of a position to talk with more decorum at the moment.

"Cooper," he acknowledged. My ex raised an eyebrow as he looked me up and down. "What are you doing hiding in here? We've been looking all over for you."

I gestured behind me at the bottle of brandy and gave a lopsided grin. "Getting plastered. See?"

He leaned in a little and nodded. "What's the occasion?"

"Let's see," I replied, smile disappearing fast. "Finding \_another\_ damn portal to Earth? Realizing all my work before now meant nothing? Knowing there's still a great threat to the UNSC's homeworld? Take

your pick, there's plenty to go around."

Ethan released a sigh. "Can I come in?"

In lieu of an answer, I gestured grandly and stepped aside to let him in. "If you want to forget the world for a while, the brandy's on my desk."

"I've never known you to drink," he stated plainly, after moving over to the desk and raising the bottle to inspect it.

That made me chuckle. "Of course you don't. We were kids the last time we saw each other."

"I guess you told me you'd had a bit the time we talked in the quad, but..." He shook his head, stopping there. "Anyway. That's not what I came here for."

"Okay. What is it then?"

He swallowed, looked around for a moment, then finally took the seat I'd just vacated in my chair and ran a hand through his hair. "Got another glass?"

"Sure." I stepped over to the tiny closet and produced another, then poured him a drink, which he took and drank from immediately.

"Thanks."

"No problem," I said, folding my arms across my chest now as I stood over him. "So?"

"Well, I started to tell you already. We got worried when you just disappeared like that. From what I can tell, it's not like you to not tie up loose ends before you retire to your quarters at night."

I shrugged. "It's not like me to do a lot of things, but this job really tests your resolve." It was my turn to sigh this time. "I've made a lot of mistakes, Ethan, and it's not until later that you fully see the repercussions of your actions. The damn shitty consequences of the decisions you've made."

"What do you mean?"

He was looking at me with such rapt attention that I couldn't help but feel a little grateful at his presence. Talking it out with someone was much better than trying to get drunk by yourself.

"Khan went belly-up quicker than I imagined it would, and it could've even been a lot worse," I confessed. "You remember I just said this job really tests your resolve? It can also alter a bit of who you are, change you in ways you didn't see coming."

"Like what?"

I gave a small self-deprecating smile. "I'm not good, Ethan. I always thought I was, but Khan taught me different." I made it a point to look him in the eyes now, his rich brown ones meeting my green. "I sacrificed a whole platoon of Marines there to stop the Prometheans

and Storm from entering the portal to Earth. I told myself it was to save millions - probably billions - more on the home planet. Told myself it was for the best." I paused, glancing down at the socks on my feet now that my boots were off, before looking up again. "And now, here we are all over again. Another portal to block up or destroy, and a pretty clear fucking indication that I failed - here and on Khan. I let forty fucking people die for nothing. Do you know what that's like? To have something like that on your hands? And they want to make me a full-bird colonel? What the hell do I say to that when this is what I have to carry with me?"

Unlike with Willis, whom I sometimes thought couldn't take the raw honesty I could deliver at times, Ethan surprisingly took it in stride and made a sweeping gesture with the drink in his hand.

"Well, as the king of fuck-ups, I'd say you're not doing so bad, Natalie."

I snorted. "How do you figure?"

"In my experience, all commanders get to the point sometime or another where they have to choose the mission over the men. It's what we train for and the kinds of choices an officer is expected to make - even more so at the higher ranks. You did the best you could with what you knew at the time, Cooper. You can't fault yourself for that. You still prevented something terrible from happening back then, and I think you can still do that now, too."

"Ethan...my little brother was with them. The Marines I let die, I mean. I very nearly killed him, and knew I'd effectively sealed his fate when I made the call. It's a miracle he made it out alive. Doesn't that make me..." My voice suddenly faltered and I shook my head. "Shit."

I felt the tears welling up in my eyes before I could stop them, and much to my surprise, Ethan instantly set his half-finished drink down on the desk and stood, folding me in his arms. Even more surprising was the fact that I didn't pull away or make a move to step back, but rested my head on his shoulder, unable to do anything else to keep from falling apart.

"Natalie," he whispered gently, "you're not a monster. You're not any sub-human class of any other species, either. You're a person, you're a leader and you made a choice. The right one, to save the most lives at the time. Don't let this erase all the good you've ever done in your life, or in the Corps." He snorted. "If anyone's a monster, it's me. For what I did to you all those years ago. And for letting you go."

His last words left my mind reeling, and when I pulled back a little to look up at him, I knew the mood had suddenly changed. I had the uneasy feeling a mistake was about to be made, so I shook my head and broke the embrace fully, moving away.

"You should go, Ethan," I finally said. "This has been dead and buried for a long time now. I think I can forgive you, but I can't forget, and Willis is waiting for me to come home."

My ex glanced up at the ceiling, then slowly nodded. "And you love

him."

"Yes."

"Okay," he exhaled on a sigh. "Just...do us both a favor and don't dwell on what happened on Khan. Finding this portal...it doesn't have to mean what you think it does. We can still get through this, and get it done right. So that the sacrifice your Marines made wasn't in vain."

"Thank you."

He gave a final nod of acknowledgment and stepped quietly out the door, closing it shut behind him. Once he left I released a long breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, took a seat on the chair once more, and rubbed at my temple. Somehow, I knew this was only the beginning of a very long night.

### 31. Chapter 30: Parts Unknown

**\*\*Chapter Thirty: Parts Unknown\*\***

**\*\*0922 Hours, September 1, 2558. UNSC Concord Naval Air Base, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Next Step," Planet Earth. Day Forty-Four of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

"Excellent work, sir. Just a few more reps and I'll leave you to it."

Dressed in his PT gear, Major Hawk nodded at the words and continued to lift the heavy weights in his hands. He could feel that his whole body was getting much stronger now, finally close to fully healed from the devastating crash that had effectively ended his career several months ago. Many had thought the situation hopeless, including a lot of the doctors he'd gone to see, but he'd come here every day anyway hoping to prove them wrong.

One person, at least, had always believed in his success. Natalie.

\_Doing this for you, Coop,\_ he thought to himself as he pushed his body to its limits. \_For you, for me, and for the kids.\_

"Very good, Major. Keep going through the rest of the exercises. I'll be back in thirty."

As the physical therapist walked away, moving on to one of his other patients, Willis set the dumbbells in each of his hands down and wiped the slight moisture from his forehead with the underside of his T-shirt collar. Once again he found himself reflecting on the fact that it'd been some time already since his wife had last made contact. He wondered how things were going out on Requiem, and how soon she'd be returning home.

\_And if she's bringing anything dangerous with her...\_

He still remembered his talk with his CO back in July about the mission Cooper had laid out before her on the artificial planet. It was a hotbed of activity for both Prometheans and Storm, and the

brass was worried about possible repercussions on Earth if things weren't contained. Major Collins hadn't spoken of that with him since, but they had been preparing, all the while hoping such a thing never actually occurred. He'd tried his best to shield his kids from the worst, but sometimes -

"Hey!" he heard a shout from across the gym room, almost startled as he glanced up to see his PT looking over at him. "I don't see you working, Hawk! You want to get better, sir, you need to put in the effort."

\_I put in the effort every goddamn day,\_ Hawk thought sourly. He said nothing, though, and nodded back before standing to move on to his next exercise.

After going through a series of push-ups, sit-ups, and pull-ups, he spent a few minutes working on a leg-press machine before jumping on one of the treadmills and pumping it up to one of the highest settings. Everything that had been going on lately - from the potential threat to Earth to his wife's absence, her sparse communication, and the knowledge that her old boyfriend was there with her - made him pound the rubber conveyor belt hard. Hawk had to admit that he missed his kids on weekdays like these when they were at school now, having just returned, but he also cherished this time alone to get everything out of his mind. It was like dumping out all the negative, getting himself recharged for the rest of the day ahead.

He spent over a half-hour running hard, so much so that when he was finished, a large sweat stain circled his shirt on his chest and underarms from the exertion. He found his PT smiling at him once he stepped off the machine.

"Now \_that's\_ what we like to see, Major. Oorah."

"Oorah," Willis answered, tired but satisfied. He grabbed the towel his PT held out to him and started in on mopping up the sweat from his face. "So what's next?"

"Well, sir, I've got - "

"Major Hawk, a word."

Hawk turned to see Major Collins coming up behind them. The physical therapist immediately acknowledged her presence with a nod as he stood straighter.

"Ma'am."

"Sergeant. I'm going to borrow your patient for a while."

"Yes, ma'am."

Willis followed his air wing commander out of the gym then and down the hall, neither saying a word until they reached the outside. There, Major Collins took a sharp turn to the left and stopped, facing her fellow O-4 with her arms crossed over her chest.

"We've received a message from Lieutenant Colonel Cooper this week, Hawk," she stated simply. "It's not looking good."

The younger major frowned. "What is it?"

"You'll remember what we spoke of in my office a few months ago? About the possibility of the situation there making its way to Earth?"

"Yes."

Collins took a deep breath. "It might be happening soon. Your wife's regiment has found a portal on Requiem."

"\_Fuck\_." Willis closed his eyes for a moment and ran a hand over his sweaty hair, his towel now draped over his neck. He gripped the ends hard in his fists, shifting his dogtags slightly beneath it, and glanced back at his CO. "Do we know anything beyond that yet, Collins? Numbers, location?"

"Not yet. Our spooks and scientists are still trying to trace its exact exit point. But if Cooper doesn't keep things on a tight leash there, you'll understand \_we're\_ the next stop."

"Yeah."

"That's why I need to know now if you're ready, Hawk. Can you be cleared to fly soon?"

"I'm not sure. How soon?"

"You've got the remainder of the week. At that point, I'm moving the rest of the air wing to a listening station near Luna. It'll be our best chance of hitting the Prometheans hard if and when they come through."

Major Hawk furrowed his light brown eyebrows in confusion. "Why Earth's moon?"

"Because it's the perfect place to take on any threat to Earth, should it come from outside the atmosphere or within," Collins replied. "Since we don't know our target's exact reentry point, Luna is a good choice."

"And we'll have support?"

"Yes. The commandant has scrambled two more air wings to help out since we're not at full strength right now. However, I could still use the added expertise you bring to the table. We need our best pilot out there with us."

Hawk nodded. "You know I can't make promises, but I'll try my best. I've been working my ass off lately and feeling much better, and my next physical is set for tomorrow. I can let you know then what the doctor says." \_God knows I'd love to be in a flight suit again,\_ Hawk thought to himself. \_And most importantly, in the cockpit.\_

"Please do. We're on a very tight timeline starting now." She unraveled her stance and shook her head. "For better or for worse, the ball is in the lieutenant colonel's court now. What happens on Requiem will decide what exactly we will or won't encounter here in a few days' time."

Willis blew out a breath. "I got it, Major. But I believe in her."  
\_And I think now, finally, I believe in me, too.\_

Even just a few short weeks ago, he couldn't have imagined the dramatic improvement in his condition that he'd seen in the last month or so. It was miraculous, to say the least, just like his survival of the horrific crash on Khan in the first place. But if he made it out of this, he'd emerge a better, stronger Marine for it. Prepared to fight hard, both for his own survival as well as that of his fellow pilots, his kids, and the planet.

With the conversation concluded, Hawk and Collins parted ways - Willis heading back into the gym for more training, Collins off to see to the preparation of the air wing's latest move. Hawk realized then that if he were to succeed and get returned to flight status the next day, he'd have to find someone to watch Gabe and the twins when he departed. That was going to be a challenge, considering his sister had taken off herself recently to return to duty with the Navy, and his parents were on Mars. Maybe there was a way to get them over there again before shit really hit the fan.

Then again, his wife might just stop everything in its tracks on her end, given her accomplishments with similar feats in the past. If the war had taught him anything, it was that anything was possible - good and bad.

\_Fight hard, Coop,\_ he thought then as he did some stretches before the next PT phase. \_As much as I want to be back in a bird, I hope I don't have to come back to something like this.\_

He shut his eyes as new beads of sweat formed and rolled down his forehead into them, stinging a little. \_But be safe, too. If this does get bad in a hurry, we're going to need you home.\_

## 32. Chapter 31: Not So Blessed

Author's Note: Yes, I'm still alive, and yes, it's been a while since the last chapter lol. I'll admit I got caught in the frenzy of trying to get to level 32 in Destiny, so that means I did A LOT of raiding and very little writing in the last month. Shame on me. :P

But I finally got that crowning achievement, so now I promise to focus on getting more installments of this out. xD

Hope you enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Thirty-One: Not So Blessed<span>\*\*

\*\*1510 Hours, September 5, 2558. Forerunner Shield World Surface, Requiem. "The Final Hour," Epiloch System. Day Forty-Eight of the War of Tomorrow \*\*

The last time I saw my older sister Jenna alive I was twenty-two and had just returned home from two and a half years on the frontlines, one of which was spent on Coristal - my very first campaign as a Marine officer. I didn't know it yet but I was already pregnant with



Gabe when I got leave, having had a completely chance encounter with Willis when his squadron landed on the base my unit was posted at at the time to refuel. I got to go back to Mars - and my family - for a couple weeks, and in theory that was supposed to have been a nice, if short, bit of vacation from it all.

Except it wasn't. My husband was still out there fighting among the stars, and I'd just finished a bloody and lengthy combat tour on a UNSC colony world that only barely still existed. The Covenant were gaining ground faster than we could hold them back, and by then it was no secret anymore that the war wasn't going in our favor. Humanity was very much on its last legs, and after all I'd seen and experienced in the last couple dozen months, I was acting more quiet and reserved than usual.

With my older brother Mark also gone on deployment, that left just me, my younger brother Travis, our little sister Allison, and our mother at home at the time. Jenna showed up a few days into my leave - also getting a much-needed break from the Marines - and I couldn't have been more relieved to see a non-civvie face.

She helped me cope with a lot the last week or so that we were home together. How to deal with missing Willis so much it hurt when we were apart, how to evade the questions that Mom had whenever we showed up again at her doorstep, how to deal with my younger siblings who had yet to join the service and see the things we'd seen. I was always grateful of the time she took to spend with me when she had her own family - her own husband and son - to take care of and go see on her brief stay at home. But she knew I was in kind of a rough shape, so she felt the least she could do for her little sister was provide some guidance.

"You're lucky you've got a sister like me, you know," I remember her saying with a grin on her face one afternoon when we sat on the front steps together, just me and her. Then she turned serious. "If I'd had somebody to talk to that could relate to things the first time I got back, maybe some things would have turned out different."

She took a drink from the bottle of beer in her hand and I did the same. We just sat there in silence for a while and somehow, that helped. Simply knowing that the person sitting next to you had gone through the same thing, and that there were certain events or feelings you didn't even have to explain to them. She knew exactly what I was going through without me having to utter a single word, and that meant a lot to me when I felt so closed off from the rest of my family at the time - whether it be an emotional distance, like with my mom and younger siblings, or a physical one with my husband.

Jenna helped all of us with everything - that's what made her death a few months later all the more painful to bear.

We found out later that my sister had been killed in action by a Covenant sniper. Nothing more, nothing less, but it shattered all our hearts and broke two families in half - hers and ours. And as much as I wanted to make sure that that didn't happen to me next, I wanted it even less for the men and women I led.

"Cooper," a voice sounded behind me. "Sometimes I think you spend too much time in that head of yours."

I snorted as I finally glanced up from the holographic map on my datapad. "And I don't think I do it enough. I'm still not able to anticipate \_every single thing\_ that gets thrown at us, so I must be doing something wrong."

"You're not. We just need to hold out a little longer."

I shook my head. "See, that's where you're wrong. The Prometheans aren't just going to let us camp out here as long as we want. This is their portal and they're going to come after it. I want us to be prepared."

"And you never can be for \_everything\_."

"But it's my job to be," I replied softly.

Ethan sighed and switched off the projection. "You've done what you can on our end, Colonel. We've got the defenses set up outside and the scientists in here getting a definitive location on this thing for us. And Outpost Xavier is secure. Beyond that, there's nothing left to do."

Finally I nodded in assent. "I know. I just can't fail my men again, Ethan."

By that point I'd spent all the time fretting down here in the chamber that I could. I pulled my rifle off my shoulder and started to head topside again, if nothing else than to check in on how my Marines were faring out there without any enemy activity, when Doctor Leedom stopped me.

Or more accurately, both of us, since it was obvious she wanted the spook to hear what she had to say as well.

"Colonel, Commander, we have calculated a probable exit point for the portal," she said without preamble. "Only one of us disagrees."

"Okay," I said, gripping my weapon to my chestplate. "And?"

"This appears to resolve somewhere along North America's eastern seaboard."

I instantly went cold inside. Of all the possible places, this was by far the worst. "You're sure?"

"Yes. Much like SlipSpace, it's not an exact science, unfortunately; though the portals always have a definitive exit, the coordinates we determine can be off by a few hundred miles. But not normally more than that."

Gradually I took in the news and nodded again. "I understand, Doctor. I'll let HighCom know." I motioned up ahead. "I've got an escort waiting for you and your team topside to take you back to the outpost. Captain Diaz will get an info packet from me shortly and I'll have him send along the message from my COM console in my absence."

"Excellent. Thank you."

I waited for the biting remark about my mother or something similar, but much to my relief it didn't come. It seemed the severity of the situation warranted some tact on her part, although she'd shown little back on Khan.

My ex just stood there watching my reaction for a moment, clearly confused. "Natalie? Why is that area any worse than anywhere else?"

"Because Willis and our kids are there," I answered steadily. I gave him a look, more to keep my true feelings clamped down, and quickly moved past him. "Now, we've got work to do."

\* \* \*

><p>It didn't start out as the full-on assault it would become. Roving patrols of Storm filled the landscape on occasion, oftentimes fighting with the Prometheans themselves, and there were more than a few times where we had to get involved in the clash in the last week or so we'd been here. Today though, as more and more of robotic enemies came out of the woodwork, it took very little time for me to realize that this was the makings of their great counterassault.<p>

"Let's go, let's go!" I shouted at Delaney's Marines scrambling all around me, moving into pre-established positions as a wave of Prometheans made their way through the jungle at us. "Make sure your weapons are locked and loaded, Marines! We can't let them through!"

Further ahead I could hear the major calling out additional orders of his own, trying to prep our men and women for the coming fight. In my head I tried to remember what Ethan had said to me earlier as I held my own rifle to bear and hunkered down to wait myself just behind the forward line - we'd done all we absolutely could to prepare. Now came the reckoning.

The one thing I regretted not having in the moment was reliable air support in case things got dicey. I had the option of calling on Captain Heat and the rest of the squadrons if we needed the help, but they weren't going to be much use with the dense vegetation surrounding us. If the pilots couldn't see their target, they'd be just as likely to hit us as the enemy.

No room for heavy vehicles or tanks, either. We were on our own out here.

As usual the MGs were the first to get in on the action, commencing the fight with a harsh rattling sound that permeated the area. It was nothing I wasn't used to after so many years in the Corps, and it set the tempo well and got us all on even higher alert. I could feel the adrenaline already coursing through my veins, amped and prepared to defend the portal - and, by extension, Earth - once again.

The Crawlers advanced fast as the Knights teleported in behind them, Watchers following their charges closely up above. But we were ready. Our forward row of mines got rid of the first crop of enemy AI-bots just as quick, while machine guns and heavy weapons took care of many of the rest. For those that still managed to break through our

perimeter, bullets from our sharpshooters and the remainder of the Marines awaited them, striking many down through precisely-timed headshots and sharp bursts to the gut.

"Don't stop firing, Marines! Let 'em have it!"

That wasn't to say the Prometheans weren't hitting heavy, too, though. I watched a number of their EMP grenades make it through the fray, instantly frazzling a whole squad of Marines at once as their electronic systems went down and later rebooted. The robots were able to get past our first line of defense that way once all the mines were gone, stunning my men just long enough to get light rounds tearing through their armor and short purple blades from the Knights puncturing their organs. It wasn't long before our forward lines were hitting the dirt almost as quickly as theirs were, and that was a big fucking problem.

With that, and knowing the current impediment our normally indispensable helmets were creating, I had a choice to make. The flash between pros and cons was quick in my mind, and I found myself issuing the order even before I'd reached a conscious decision. "Marines, take your HUD systems offline, now! You know what to do, and I want no distractions! Take those bots down!" On a separate channel, I amended, "Delaney and Ackerson, us three are the exception. I need to be able to keep in contact with you two, but keep an eye on your HUD. I don't want either of you to get rattled if you go dark. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Got it, Colonel."

"Good. Let's do this."

The barrage was constant and everywhere now, with the Prometheans pushing into our lines the harder we fought to keep them at bay. MG gunners and snipers and everyone else were doing their utmost to maintain control of our sector, but more and more Knights teleported in with their entourage of Watchers and Crawlers, the doggy bots moving on ahead sometimes because of just how damn fast they were. It was all what I'd been expecting and not at the same time - and this time, unlike on Khan, I wasn't prepared to go out with a bang if things didn't work out. We were the last line of defense and we had to hold this ground...at all costs.

I was busy looking down the scope of my battle rifle for targets - easy to find thanks to the chaos around us - when I was unceremoniously shoved off my perch. When I caught myself on the dirt with one hand, I found myself glaring up at Ethan's brown eyes from beneath his helmet.

"Are you crazy?" I hissed. "I've got my finger in the trigger guard, Ethan. I could've killed you if I'd turned around."

True to form, he just smirked down at me with a shrug. "Probably wouldn't be the first time you've wanted to do that." Then his features went dead serious. "I don't know if you've noticed, ma'am, but this isn't exactly going the way we'd hoped."

"It's more resistance than we'd planned on, sure, but - "

My ex cut me off with a shake of his head. "No. Watch. Our defenses are breaking down all along the center, and our left flank just folded. Major Delaney's helmet busted just after your COM call, and he had me jog up here to tell you."

"Fuck," I muttered. "No way. Show me."

From where I stood, I didn't have a good angle on the whole battlefield. I didn't think anywhere in the thick jungle did. Ethan handed me his datapad to see, where the tactical view of the sector was displayed. There, I could finally see what I hadn't while I'd been in the middle of it myself - the left side of our lines were indeed collapsing. The Prometheans were making their way straight towards the entrance through there.

"Dammit," I said. Gripping my weapon tighter, I stood and added, "Ethan, let's - "

A Watcher suddenly turned the corner on one of the diagonal gray structures we were standing beside and rapidly began firing right at us. I ducked as my security detail - and my ex - went into action, but I was more concerned about Ethan's welfare since I knew I was well-protected. As soon as the hail of light rounds stopped going off around us, I pulled up my rifle quick and squeezed the trigger. To my right, Staff Sergeant Lynch did the same with his SAW, and the drone was down in no time.

"Ethan?" I called out, my gut inexplicably in my throat since I couldn't see where he went.

"Here!" he shouted back, turning the corner of the structure opposite us. "Thing tried hard to take me out, but I managed to get to cover."

"Okay, good, because I think we've got more on the way!"

Not surprisingly, right behind the Watcher came a Knight, followed by yet another drone and its charge. While we had our hands full trying to get a handle on things back here, ensuring the portal didn't fall back into enemy hands, I opened up a COM channel to Delaney to issue orders about bolstering the left flank back up. That was about the same time I realized Ethan had said he didn't have a working helmet anymore. I cursed silently to myself and turned to Lynch instead.

"Staff, I need you to do something for me!" I yelled over the sound of gunfire. "I need you to get to Major Delaney with a message! We have to cover up that left flank again! Tell him to pull his reserve company forward and plug that hole, right now, or we'll get overrun!"

"Ma'am?" he cried in confusion, although his weapon never stopped firing in the right direction.

"I need you to leave me and go do that, Staff - and take two Marines with you! We'll be fine!"

With my cheek pressed up against the far side of the gray wall now as I aimed up at the second Watcher, shooting off bursts and ducking

back again once the Knights returned fire, I knew Lynch could find no room to counter me on this. As much as he wanted to protest, I watched him nod resolutely out of the corner of my eye, pick two men, and leave. I was grateful to him for that because it meant a better advantage for my Marines - and Earth - but for those of us left behind, it was going to be a tough fight.

"Ethan, you got smoke?" I shouted across the way, seeing Ethan doing much the same as me - firing and then ducking - from the other side.

"Yes, ma'am!" came the response. "One!"

"Let 'em have it! We need to pull back to a stronger position!"

"On it!"

I motioned for my security detail to form up tighter around me, still squeezing off bursts of BR fire at the Knights while they moved. The Watcher was already down thanks to my combined fire with Ethan, and now I worked to keep the enemies' attention on me as the spook prepped the grenade.

"Smoke out!" he finally yelled, pulling his arm back just a bit for the short throw. I kept firing as I got the remainder of the Marines ready to go, then the rest was waiting for the smoke to get thick and envelop us. In less than thirty seconds, we were on the move.

I kept my rifle close to my chestplate as we ran, barrel pointed down while we moved to another section of the gray structure, this one further away from the ramp that led inside. By shifting locations I was hoping to throw the Prometheans off, in addition to giving us a better vantage point. I realized though that the AI-bots had been here long before us, and it was a lot more difficult to disorient them than us. Still, I was willing to try anything at this point, even if all it did was buy us some time to regroup.

"Lynch should be back by now," Ethan said to me as he stood close, lifting his own battle rifle to bear. "He shouldn't be taking this long to get the message to the major while he leaves you exposed."

At that I snorted. "I'm hardly \_'exposed'\_. I've still got most of my detail with me, and I \_do\_ know how to use a gun if all else fails, you know."

"That's not what I meant. He's got the SAW. Half your firepower's easily gone with that thing."

"We've still got more than most. We can make it."

All I could do at this point was hope Lynch had gotten the word across, because right now the two Knights were coming back for more - and they weren't alone this time.

No new Watchers showed up, or Knights, although a hell of a lot of Crawlers did. Before the smoke had even finished clearing they started bounding into our area, cleverly using the haze as cover themselves. With mid-range, low rate of fire weapons, Ethan and I were immediately at a disadvantage, and I could see why he lamented

the loss of the SAW. But my security detail was still plentiful where we lacked, and they instantly opened up with their assault weapons and SMGs to compensate.

Somewhere in the fray a frag bounced out, sending three Fido-bots to that doggy place in the sky in a single detonation. I shut my eyes tight as sparks and metal chunks rained down on us for a moment, then turned back fast to face the continuing horde. I went down on one knee and took in a calming breath, firing at the more distant bots while the closer ones were eaten up by the rest of my team's bullets. The Knights were still the prevailing problem, however, and it didn't take them long to return to the forefront of my mind.

It started with the EMP grenade that got tossed close to my feet, and despite my readiness and expectation that my HUD would go down, it was still hard to dismiss completely. I bent my head and shut my eyes tight for the briefest of seconds against the total and sudden loss of information, but that was all it took for the teleporting robot beings to advance several yards to get in front of us.

Even in my crouch it was apparent that the Knights had little trouble getting access to me, considering how quickly one came up and caught my neck in a vice-grip. I was lifted three or four feet off the ground before I even knew what was happening, and only then did the disturbing realization set in that I was being choked. Again.

In the depths of my mind I understood that I was at the complete mercy of an inorganic being now, since the Knight definitely had enough force to crush my trachea on the first try. Why it wasn't I couldn't begin to speculate, I just knew that even with its restraint, I was getting blue in the face pretty fast.

"Natalie!" I heard Ethan shout somewhere behind me, but he sounded far away. "Hang on!"

I was sputtering and gasping and coughing by now - not really in any sort of shape to respond. My arms were scrambling for purchase on the Knight's grip, my legs kicking wildly beneath me and my vision was starting to close on the edges. I knew it wouldn't be much longer now before I was toast.

Then came the loud burst of gunfire from behind...one that sounded like it went on forever.

I was thrown harshly and suddenly to the side in the moment, hitting the wall of the gray structure first before falling face-first onto the ground. Not exactly conducive to getting a decent grasp on what was going on - or what had occurred that I'd been so quickly let go. It was only once I'd stopped moaning and coughing from the impact and was able to push myself up a little that I saw who'd arrived just in time to save me - Lynch.

"Sorry I took so long to get back, Colonel," he said, pausing momentarily in his SAW barrage to extend his hand to help me up. "It's okay. Knight's are down now, and so are most of the little kickers."

All I could do was slowly nod as I got back to my feet in an uneven manner. My head was swimming and my lungs burning, and most of my body throbbed in pain from the hit. But I tried to push past it all

to think.

"How's...Delaney's men?" I managed to cough out. "Left flank...?"

"Secured, ma'am. The major got it back under control for now."

"N-nice."

Now on top of everything else, my old wound ached. I briefly pressed my hand to where the two needler rounds had gone into me and forced down the pain. Ethan took the opportunity to move in closer.

"Cooper? You're sure you're good?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I said, waving him off before he could reach out to keep me steady. "I got it."

He didn't look convinced, but he paused in his movement. "All right. What's our next move?"

I took a second to sling my rifle behind my back - not without effort - and pulled out my canteen instead to drink. Somehow, it helped with the thought process as well as hydration after the close call. "Obviously we need to keep the Prometheans as far from the entrance as possible. I posted a full guard there but I don't want to be hanging around it too much so the bots see where we've got things the most fortified - they'll know that's the spot."

"Understood. Should we - "

"\_Colonel!\_"

It sounded like someone had just screamed out my rank in bloody murder. The hairs went up on the back of my neck and I instantly brought my gun up again, turning in the direction of the sound. "Marines? What's going on?"

I started running first, then Lynch and Ethan and the rest lunged forward from behind. I got to the scene before the entrance just in time to watch one of my men get skewered by a Knight. He was the last Marine alive of the team I'd left behind there to guard the ramp, and now he was dead, too.

Behind the Knight were dozens upon dozens of others. They'd teleported in.

"Holy shit," Ethan said, voicing my thoughts exactly.

We were close enough to check out the scene but still far enough away to not have to engage. And considering the circumstances - less than ten Marines versus what had to be hundreds of the enemy - I made the tough call to retreat.

"Move back!" I shouted at my detail, and together we backed away with our guns up until we found a nook beneath one of the structures to slip into and pause to assess.



"Shit," the spook repeated, running a hand over his face. "How did we not see them before?"

"I don't know," I responded, feeling truly defeated for the first time. "I don't fucking know. But they're in."

"So what now, Colonel?" Staff Sergeant Lynch asked.

It was that moment that I got the distinct feeling I was running out of karmic juice - that luck that had kept me alive on more than one occasion in the past when I really should have died. Now it was time to collect...and the price was Earth.

I almost wasn't able to swallow down the bile in my throat. That was how clearly I saw the dire consequences of my loss. My failure.

"Nothing, Staff," I finally answered, voice solid but low. "The rest of Delaney's Marines are having a hard enough time as it is keeping the lines up. There's no one left to spare, and the Marines at Xavier are too far away to come help. The Prometheans are already in that portal room right now, as we speak." Thinking it couldn't hurt things now, I pulled off my helmet and ran a quick hand through my hair, momentarily closing my eyes as I did so, hearing the loud heartbeat in my chest and feeling the rapid flow of sweat on my brow. "We can't stop them. The Prometheans've got a straight shot to Earth."

### 33. Chapter 32: Green Lit

**\*\*Chapter Thirty-Two: Green Lit\*\***

**\*\*0811 Hours, September 6, 2558. UNSC Listening Post Alpha One, Near Luna. "The Reckoning," Planet Earth. Day Forty-Nine of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

It had taken a lot to get to this point, but Willis had finally arrived. He was back in a flightsuit and cleared for duty.

The results of his final PT test should have left him ecstatic; more than just his career, the major felt like he had his life back. It was everything he'd been hoping to achieve for months. And yet, in the moment, it didn't seem nearly enough.

Major Hawk had slept poorly the past few nights, first filled with worry about his impending medical evaluation, then worried for Cooper and their kids when he found out he'd be returning full-time to his unit. Of course he'd been thrilled at the news, but later found himself scrambling for a suitable babysitter at the last minute when he was set to leave for a listening post outside the atmosphere right away. He'd finally settled on a young married couple near base that he and Cooper had known since their arrival in Florida five years ago, and whom they'd subsequently befriended. They only had one son, Keaton, about Gabriel's age, so it wasn't too much of a hardship for them to take on three more in their home. They'd always been very gracious about offering to watch the Hawk children if the need ever arose. Willis decided now was finally the time to take them up on their offer.

It'd been harder than he thought to leave the kids behind, though. Willis already felt the gnawing ache in his chest.

Their goodbyes had been heartbreaking, thanks to the suddenness of it all for them - and the realization that they'd now not only be without their mother for who knew how long, but also without their dad. No grandparents to watch them this time, either. Hawk hated the circumstances forced on his family, but even that wasn't his greatest concern right now. His absolute deepest worry was that Cooper would fail on Requiem, and that the Prometheans - maybe even the Storm - would come to Earth.

He was sitting in the mess of the listening station when he got word that exactly that had happened. It was Major Collins who approached him, striding to his table fast.

"Hawk, new message from HighCom just came in," she said. "Read it."

Willis felt his insides stir when he pulled out his datapad and took a look. The new message was indeed from High Command, but below was the original, sent from Requiem by a Captain Tanner Diaz. It was an info packet Diaz had forwarded for Natalie. The major frowned as he continued reading.

When he was done, he glanced up at his CO. "Holy shit. They're coming here."

"Yes." Collins released a weary sigh, almost like a sound of defeat. "Colonel Cooper wasn't able to keep them contained on Requiem."

"I'm sure she did her best," Willis responded softly, still not quite believing what he'd read.

The other major reached out and clasped one of his shoulders in support. "Of that I have no doubt, Hawk. I'm sorry things turned out this way."

"Yeah. Me, too."

Hawk glanced down at the remainder of his breakfast and found he'd lost his appetite. Instead he pushed his meal into the trash and stood, fulling zipping up the top of his flightsuit and intending to head for the pilots' lockers.

"Major? Where are you going?"

"Flight deck," Willis answered. "If those bastards got into the portal, they'll be here shortly. We need to get the air wing out and prepare."

"This message was sent yesterday on Requiem time, and we haven't heard of any attacks so far. We don't even know where - "

"They're coming to Earth, Collins. That much we know for sure. We need to be out in space, now, and ready to go. It'll be a few less steps we have to take when we actually do have a viable target and location."

Major Collins was taken slightly aback by her XO's sudden

determination, but couldn't find any faults in his conclusion. She let out another sigh and nodded.

"You're right. Let's get the air wing mustered and outside. After that, we'll just take things from there."

\* \* \*

><p>There was almost a heady rush to zero-gee flight that Willis had sorely missed. After months of not being even allowed near the cockpit of any flight-capable machine, it felt awesome to actually be at the helm of one again.<p>

He only wished the circumstances were different, but that wasn't something he could help. He was here now, and at the very least, was no longer constrained by his own body. He could be a great asset to Earth's defense rather than a helpless observant, and that was something to be glad about.

The only thing he found himself missing in the moment, besides Natalie and his kids, was his old wingmate.

\_You mean the one who shot you down?\_ his mind immediately interjected. \_The one who forced you into a coma you barely survived, months of therapy, and nearly cost you your life's dream? \_

Willis shook his head to focus. \_Yeah, him, I'm better off without.\_

"Delta and Sierra Squadrons, this is Gold Leader," he said over the COM then, very happy to be back. "As per Flight Leader's orders, we're to remain on station and be prepared for all possible scenarios. To be honest, we don't really know exactly what we're going to be up against, or where and when it'll hit. For now we're on standby, but be ready to engage at a moment's notice. Gold out."

For a minute Hawk thought about the implications of his suggestion aboard the listening station. By sitting out here like this, the air wing was indeed better equipped to handle trouble fast, but they were also expending fuel, oxygen, and maybe even food and water stores aboard their respective Broadwords that certainly wouldn't last forever. Willis's plan had made them a rapid response team, but at the expense of supplies. That perhaps would come under fire later as unnecessary, depending on how things went and just how long they'd have to sit out here in wait.

As much to keep his own nerves steady as to check in on things, the major opened up a private link to his new wingmate - First Lieutenant Connor Adrian, a pilot he'd fought with on the voyage to Khan, who'd since been moved to his roster.

"Machete, how're we looking so far? Antsy?"

"No, sir. I'm good," came the hasty reply. "I actually like relaxing out in space. View's nice. Definitely better than what we had on that damn station."

Major Hawk chuckled. "Roger that. Would've been great to have at least one viewport in the whole place."

"Maybe we can ask the engineers to requisition that for us if we'll be here a while, sir. Who knows when those new bots'll hit."

"From what I hear it should be soon. Don't get too comfy back there."

"Won't, Talon."

The minutes stretched. Willis found himself looking at his watch out of sheer boredom, but that only made the time tick by slower. Instead he turned his attention to his family picture, ritually taped to the cockpit, and pressed two gloved fingers to the image, feeling his heart swell.

\_I'm back, Coop,\_ he thought to himself. \_I'm finally back. And I promise I'll do all I can to keep our kids safe.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chaos replaced the calm faster than anyone would have anticipated. One moment they were sitting out there with nothing to do, a sea of pilots in Broadwords waiting for the shit to come down, and the next everyone was jolted into action.<p>

"UNSC personnel and crewmembers on station, be advised: we've got an unknown enemy vessel approaching. Watch your vectors."

Before Hawk could respond to the hail, his CO beat him to it.

"LP Alpha this is Flight Leader, on your twelve o'clock," Collins said into the COM. "What's the vessel's heading?"

"Zero-six-four by three-zero-zero-one."

\_Shit,\_ Willis thought. \_They're right behind us and we never saw it.\_

"Delta and Sierra, do a slow one-eighty, weapons up," Hawk ordered over the same channel.

"Keep your ears perked but do not engage, Talon."

"Roger that, Flight Leader."

On a private channel, Willis's wingmate spoke.

"Goddamn," he said in a low voice. "What \_is\_ that?"

Major Hawk glanced out at the darkness of space and spotted the behemoth heading toward them; not an easy thing to miss. It was oddly oblong shaped, narrow at the points and rounder near the middle. It also very clearly was neither a human nor ex-Covenant vessel, as it flew straight up and down, not horizontally like most ships the major had ever seen. There was an extended moment where he simply stared, before adrenaline got the better of him and he lit up the COM again.

"Flight Leader, that thing doesn't look like it's a part of whatever the Remnant's got left," he stated.

"No, Talon. Fleet is still trying to determine its origin."

"Should we - "

Before he could even ask his question, the warning voice from the listening post came back on, instantly overriding his words.

"Flight Leader, we've just received an incoming communication straight from HighCom. That is not a Storm ship. I repeat, not Storm. It's the Prometheans."

The response made a whole lot of sense, but still Willis wondered how they knew that. In due time that was addressed as well.

"Also, a quick sitrep from our forces planetside," the same voice continued. "AI-bots just popped out of a portal in the southeastern US. We've now got a whole Promethean army in the Carolinas, so we better clean this up fast to get down there to help."

The major's throat suddenly felt dry. That was awfully close to home. South Carolina was less than ten hours away from Pensacola by MagLev train. Willis didn't want anything that hostile that near his kids. He forced himself to swallow though and reentered the current channel.

"LP Alpha, what about the ship?"

"Fleet's on it, Gold Leader. You're free to engage."

Willis suddenly had the sinking feeling that this was the Covenant invasion of Earth all over again - except this time, with robots. It was something he'd never wanted to feel again after that day he'd watched Athens Station get blown to bits right in front of him, but it seemed history was doomed to repeat itself.

Six years after that first large-scale fight, Earth was getting ready now for invasion number two.

"All right, Marine Wings," Collins said into the open channel then, addressing the entire air wing. "Let's get out there and do what we do best. Oorah."

"Oorah!" Willis replied loudly, along with everyone else.

Then, without any more hesitation, he jerked the controls of his F-41 and boosted towards the colossal enemy ship.

## 34. Chapter 33: Orbit

Author's Note: Well, this is going to be a first for the series, but I felt it would work out better this way. I'm splitting this chapter between both perspectives, so keep an eye on when things turn around towards the middle...and again at the end. :P

Enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Thirty-Three: Orbit<span>\*\*

**\*\*1244 Hours, September 20, 2558. UNSC Listening Post Alpha One, Near Luna. "The Return," Planet Earth. Day Sixty-Three of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

Natalie

The past two weeks since the fighting in the jungle on Requiem had been a blur.

After allowing the Prometheans to sneak past us at the last minute, I'd kept Delaney's battalion posted near the portal nonetheless to prevent any more from getting through, and took a heavily armed escort back to Outpost Xavier. There, I spoke to Diaz and heard he'd already sent out my data packet, as I'd ordered. So Earth was warned, at least. But I couldn't get my major lapse out of my head.

I didn't have long to dwell on that, though. The response from HighCom was nearly instantaneous, a rarity for how many missions they oversaw on a daily basis. I guess my failure ranked near the top to warrant such a quick and definitive reply.

I frowned at the orders when I read them. We were to return to Earth ASAP for the defense.

My regiment and I only waited long enough for our relief to come in, another two battalions who'd previously been stationed at a separate outpost on the shield world. Xavier was going to be undermanned again, and I felt for the Marines there. At least Captain Diaz and the others weren't working with a skeleton crew any longer, and had a seemingly reliable leader in the newly arrived Major Johannes Okai. He was now responsible for handling the portal out in the jungle. In three days we were loaded back onto our transport ship, the Onward Journey, and headed for humanity's homeworld.

I'd spent much of the trip back - made faster thanks to the portal we'd gone through ourselves out in space - trying to avoid contact with Ethan and kept mostly to myself, except for when duty required I consult my XO and the two spooks on things. The abrupt end of our mission on Requiem was on me, and I took the time to ensure something like that wouldn't happen again once we landed on Earth. I'd brought this mess on us, and I was determined to stop it.

I also worried a great deal about my kids and Willis, and wondered where they were, and what was happening groundside. I hoped things weren't too bad...and that we didn't arrive too late to help.

\* \* \*

><p>I'd been nervous the whole flight back, and not just because of my natural fear of being on ships. Things only got worse once we were aboard the Pelican that was to take us from our large transport to the listening post, just above Luna's orbit. I was supposed to be getting debriefed there, along with Major Brewer and Lieutenant Lloyd, before we headed dirtside.<p>

"It'll be okay, ma'am," Brewer said as she sat beside me in the bucket, another thing that made me uncomfortable. More flying. "There was nothing more we could have done on Requiem, really. The Prometheans just outsmarted us back there."

"Yeah. But I should've known what was coming."

Sitting on the opposite side of the troop bay, Lloyd sighed. "No one could have predicted that turn of events, Colonel. We had our best team out, the perimeter was heavily defended, and there was a low chance of anyone getting through. Shit happens."

I snorted. "And it happened on my watch. I own this. Whatever the hell is going on down there is my damn fault."

It was close, but I held onto my composure as the real stabbing thought went through my mind. If something happens to Will or the kids down there, I'll be the one responsible.

I'd failed not only my own family, but the whole planet.

I ran a hand through my hair then and blew out a breath, forcing myself to push the worry aside. We were about to land, and I wouldn't be able to help if I got too lost in my own head. Gathering up my gear - my helmet and weapon - I said, "All right, ladies and gentlemen. Time to go clean up this mess and make the most of it."

\* \* \*

><p>Willis<p>

As he made his way down the corridor of the listening post, Willis pulled off his helmet and unzipped the top part of his flightsuit, feeling tired and haggard from the constant dogfighting going on above Earth. He ran a hand under his jaw for a moment, feeling the growing stubble from going several days with little to no rest, let alone time to shave. He was alert now though, thanks to the first dose of stims he'd taken since the invasion had begun, and focused intently on what his CO had to say.

"We're holding them back so far, which is good," Collins was mentioning. "But we've been getting pressure from HighCom to get this wrapped up quick. They need the help pretty badly planetside. Last I heard, the Prometheans were gaining ground fast and already wreaking havoc in the cities."

Willis frowned. "Which ones?"

"Walterboro, Beaufort, Allendale. I've heard they've even gotten as far south as Savannah now, down in Georgia. Charleston was hit the worst, though. Apparently that's close to where they first popped out."

"Makes sense. Large city center."

"That's right." Major Collins paused a second, looking weary herself. "We've got to redouble our efforts out here, make sure we don't allow anything else to hit the planet. I hope the scuttlebutt about us getting reinforcements soon is true."

Me, too, Willis thought to himself. Savannah is even closer to my kids than I want to think about.

What he ended up saying aloud was, "I'm sure we'll hear more at the

briefing, Collins."

When they rounded the corner, passing by enlisted Navy crew along the way, Willis looked up to find another small group emerging from the flight deck. Must've been someone special, since only three people came off a single Pelican. That meant a high-ranking officer, possibly also here for the briefing this afternoon.

His CO stared as well. "I wasn't aware of another team joining us."

"Maybe they're the reinforcements?" Hawk asked, then chuckled lightly. "Although if three's all we get, that's going to be a major disappointment to the air wing."

The group started walking towards them then, and Willis's heart caught in his throat. He recognized all of them. But one most of all.

"Holy shit," he muttered. "That's Natalie."

It took all his willpower not to head over to her right away. Instead, in the presence of the other crew members, his CO, and Cooper's own group, he waited impatiently for them to reach him.

\* \* \*

><p>Natalie<p>

Almost mechanically I got off the ramp of the dropship and moved myself forward, trying my best to keep the darkest thoughts about what might be occurring groundside at bay. I really didn't know what to expect - although I knew things were probably not that great, and that the portal's exit was definitely not an ideal location. I was anxious to get past the briefing today and head for the planet's surface, to make up for what I'd unwittingly unleashed on part of Earth.

It was the spook who tapped my shoulder as I hefted my pack behind me and slung my BR on my shoulder.

"Uh, ma'am, isn't that..."

I finally glanced up.

And I was greeted with the best sight I'd seen in months.

"Willis," I breathed.

## 35. Chapter 34: Stars Align

### \*\*Chapter Thirty-Four: Stars Align\*\*

The world around us ceased to exist for a moment as both of us finally broke down and rushed into each other's arms. We'd spent over two long months apart, and despite the circumstances, it felt very good to be back.

Hugging awkwardly around my bulky gear, I placed my hand on Willis's



heavily stubbled cheek and pulled him in for a long kiss that sort of just happened and surprised us both. Thankfully we remembered in time that we were still in the presence of others, and we took a step back after that, trying to regain some semblance of composure around our peers and subordinates.

Willis settled for gripping my shoulder hard, grinning wide. "Hey, Cooper. I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too, Will. It's really good to see you."

"Yeah. Good to have you back."

Someone coughed very obviously behind us, and I turned around and fixed a glare at the clear culprit: Caleb. He just gave me an innocent look back, while his wife elbowed him hard in the ribs for interrupting the moment. His expression changed after that.

I took that as our cue to take a further step back and returned to more appropriate officer-like behavior. "So, what's the skinny? We didn't get a whole lot of info during our trip back, but I'm guessing things aren't that peachy."

"No, ma'am, they're not," Major Collins said, coming forward. "I was just telling your husband about some of the latest developments. At least, what we've heard floating around the Fleet. None of it's been officially confirmed yet."

I nodded. "I'm sure it will be shortly." I glanced down at my watch to check the time. "Oh minus one hour from now. Shall we break until then?"

"Yes, ma'am. Sounds fine with me."

Looking behind me, I added, "Cal? Brewer?"

Both nodded in assent.

"We'll meet you at the briefing room, Colonel," my XO replied.

"All right. See you then."

As the others moved along, Willis and I remained standing there, looking at one another until the small crowd had dispersed. I took in the sight of him back in his signature flightsuit, and couldn't help but grin - even if he did seem exhausted as hell.

"I'm not the only one who made it back," I said, gesturing to his ensemble. "You're on flight duty again."

"Yup." He beamed in return, even in his tired state. "Finally got the go-ahead from the docs. I wish it didn't have to be like this, but I'll take it over not flying at all again."

"I'm very glad, honey." I leaned in and pecked his cheek. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

I would have liked to have done more, but now wasn't the time...and

definitely not the place. I reined in my emotions and feelings and my expression sobered.

"Well, as you might expect, we've got some things to talk about," I finally said. Jerking a thumb behind me, I continued, "Head to the mess for some coffee? You look like you could use it as much as me."

My husband nodded. "Probably more. Let's go."

Walking briskly down the hall, the one thought that kept entering my mind once I'd processed Willis's return to duty was our kids. I had no clue what the situation was on the ground just yet, and with him here, that meant the kids had been placed elsewhere.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"Where's Gabe and the twins?"

He scratched at the side of his head. "Still at back at home with the Storgensen's. I didn't have time to get them to my parents on Mars, and my sister left a while ago."

I took in the information and slowly nodded. It wasn't ideal, but it was the best we could've done on such short notice. "Okay."

"You're worried about them being down there right now, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I answered without hesitation.

Willis released a sigh. "Me, too."

"How bad is it?"

"Well, from what I heard from Collins just now...not good."

We'd just crossed the threshold into the small officer's break room on this floor. The actual, larger mess was further above us, but I didn't have the will right now to head all the way up there. This would do.

We found a tiny round table to sit at and I dumped my weapon, pack, and helmet beneath it, heaving a sigh myself. Scrubbing a hand over my face, I sat down and mumbled, "I'm sorry, Will."

He turned to face me. "About what?"

"About all of this. Everything that's happening out there right now is my fault. Earth's in danger because of me. Our kids could possibly get in harm's way because of me." I glanced down at the deck, feeling my throat tense up now that I was finally around someone I could really let loose with. "Because I failed. I had one fucking job to do and I blew it."

Willis finished getting the two of us cups of coffee and sat down beside me. "What happened?"

I threw my hands up in defeat. "I don't even really know. Everything was as it should have been. We had our perimeter set up, had some setbacks in the defense but cleaned those up, kept an eye on each possible entry point and had an armed guard posted outside the damn portal room. And those bastard robots \_still\_ found a way in. They teleported into our lines en masse, and before anyone knew it, killed my men and waltzed right into the portal chamber. After that...wasn't my show anymore."

My husband took a sip of his coffee, then looked deeply into the cup. "I've gotta admit, I'm really surprised to see you here. I had no idea you were coming back so early."

"Neither did I," I responded, taking a drink myself. "I was expecting to stay on Requiem to see how we could patch things up. HighCom surprised the hell out of me by sending us orders to return immediately. Either they didn't trust me to remedy the situation out there, or we're needed pretty badly out here, to defend Earth."

"I'd say it's probably the latter, Coop. Sometimes even with the best of intentions and motivation and skill, luck just turns on you and things go to shit fast. It doesn't sound like you could have done anything different to change it."

Setting down my cup, I put my head in my hands as I slumped over the table. "I could've done something. There had to be \_something\_ I could have altered in the plans, \_something\_ I must have missed..."

In the middle of my speech, Willis reached out with one hand to gently touch my own and squeezed. Then, leaning forward, he said, "Natalie, you can't do this to yourself. This is the kind of thinking that'll eventually paralyze you as a leader. I've seen it. Don't second-guess what you did. Shit hit the fan, yes, in a big way. But now we've just got to move forward and deal with it, fix it, make it better, and not live in the \_what ifs\_ and \_what could have beens\_. We can still do this." He smiled at me then. "More importantly, \_you\_ can still do this."

I snorted. "I'm glad you still have faith in me, because I feel like the brass doesn't. The way they pulled me off the Requiem mission \_just like that\_ - "

"Means you were needed more here, nothing more. Natalie, what's done is done back on that other world. Honestly there was nothing more you could've done over there given the circumstances. Maybe the brass saw that things went belly up and they wanted their most experienced Promethean-fighting regiment back home, to defend the most critical human world. Think of it that way. Because I do."

By now he'd pulled my hands off my face and placed them on the table, stroking them lightly with his thumbs. In the moment we were alone in the small room, and I was suddenly very aware of that fact. And the fact that we'd been separated for over ten weeks. And that I'd missed him every day I'd been gone.

I was the one who leaned forward this time, closing my eyes as I touched my forehead lightly to his. "I know I said this already, but I really missed you out there."

"Me, too, Coop."

He tilted my chin up and kissed me from across the table, with emotion I felt in my heart as I kissed him back...as well as other places. It was clear very quickly that things were only going to escalate from here, so as I kissed him in return a third time, I asked in a low voice, "So where's the pilots' quarters on this station?"

He immediately caught my drift and smirked. "On the floor above us. Come on."

I picked up my weapon and gear beside my feet and followed him out, all but forgetting about the coffee we'd originally come here for, which he threw away in the trash. We hurried down the hall, stealing glances at one another as Navy crewmembers passed, until finally we just couldn't take it anymore.

After a final enlisted sailor walked by, we were suddenly alone in the hall, and Willis took hold of my hand and pulled me into the nearest room.

I was torn between indignation and a giggle when I saw where we were. "The \_motor pool\_?"

Willis frowned, but it was mocking. "Hey, it's not like I planned this." He looked around cautiously. "And it's empty..."

I reached out and gripped the front of his flightsuit, smirking back. "Then come here."

My husband was all too happy to oblige. He shoved me hard against the side of a nearby Warthog and kissed me, long and deep. I instantly wrapped my arms around him and did the same. We stood there for a while till we were breathing pretty hard, then he took my hands and guided me to the back of the jeep, grabbing hold of me underneath my legs and lifting me up onto the bed. I couldn't help but grin wickedly as he kept kissing me.

"Will, what if we get caught?" I said against his lips.

He just grinned back and invaded the space where I'd spread my legs apart on the edge, leaning in to press his lips against the side of my neck. I shivered at the touch.

"Don't worry, we won't," he whispered. "No one else is here. We'll just have to do this careful and quiet."

Before I could say anything more, he pulled back a bit to zip down the remainder of his flightsuit and tear off his shirt. Next came my own T-shirt and jacket. By then we were caught up in a frenzy of heated love and pent-up need, and our pants and boots disappeared fast.

Before he stepped in any closer, Willis kissed me hungrily, then caressed my cheek, looking me in the eyes. "I don't know how I made it these last few months without you, Cooper."

I was the one who finally pulled him in as I kissed him back just as

deep. "I don't know how \_I\_ did without you."

## 36. Chapter 35: Joint Operations

### \*\*Chapter Thirty-Five: Joint Operations\*\*

I was back in my bra, pants, and socks when I propped myself onto the bed of the Warthog again to pull on my boots. Beside me, Willis was doing the same, also currently shirtless. Even though we'd both just been thoroughly satisfied, it was still a sight to see.

He caught my lingering stare as he stood with one hand leaning on the 'Hog while he tugged on his own boots and grinned. "Sorry, Cooper, but we don't have time for more right now." He finished putting them on and leaned forward to kiss me, hard. "Unfortunately."

"Damn," I said as I kissed him back. "I really need to talk to the brass about their timing on briefings..."

Willis chuckled but it was cut short when we heard a sudden noise coming from the entrance to the room, startling us both. Someone had just walked in.

My husband and I stared at each other for a moment, caught in panic, when I gestured at him and hissed, "Hide!"

"Where?" Willis asked in a low voice.

"Uh...under the 'Hog! I'll deal with this, just give me a sec."

I hopped off the back of the jeep as quietly as I could and picked up my T-shirt from the ground, pulling it on over my head fast. I was still missing my jacket, but I figured that was the least of my concerns at the moment. For now, I focused on fixing up my hair as quickly as I could, tossing the remainder of Willis's clothes at him underneath the vehicle, and moved to intercept the intruder.

Well, I guess really we were the intruders. Whatever.

I briefly found myself wondering if whoever had just come in was the officer in charge of the motor pool - which, thankfully for us, meant he hadn't been doing his job very well - or one of the enlisted technicians. The latter was obviously easier to handle, but I prepared for both contingencies.

When I got to the entrance, walking loudly now so as not to arouse suspicion that I was trying to hide my presence here, I called out, "Is this what passes for a motor pool on this LP? Where's the OIC?"

Bingo. The new arrival immediately made herself known. The young tech took one look at the rank insignia on my camouflage cover and jumped to.

"Colonel. I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't notice you here. Anything I can help with?"

"Yes, Lance Corporal. You can tell me where your commander is. I'd like to see them about some vehicles I might need soon."

"Y-yes, ma'am. He's on break right now, but I'll go get him for you right away."

I nodded. "Good. Thank you."

The young Marine instantly turned around and left, going to look for her CO, and I breathed a sigh of relief, hoofing it back to where my husband still lay under the 'Hog. I leaned down and poked my face in beneath the vehicle, smiling wide. "She's gone. We're clear. Hurry."

Willis didn't need to be told twice. He pushed himself out from the ground and reached for his shirt, pulled it on, then zipped up the rest of his flightsuit. I finally found my jacket and donned it, too, before grabbing my gear.

We moved back to the entrance then, paused just a moment to listen and make sure no one was coming back inside just yet, then nodded silently to each other to continue on.

"Nice work, Coop," Willis said to me as we snuck out of the room. The smirk on his face was almost as infectious as mine. "That was some pretty good improvisation back there."

I snorted. "Your wife is a woman of many talents. I nearly shit myself thinking someone important had just come in. We got lucky."

My husband gave me a sideways glance and a wink. "In more ways than one."

I laughed for the first time in a long time and shoved at his side with both hands. Despite everything going on at the moment, I was suddenly in a good mood. "Stop it. We have some very serious crap to deal with right now. Let's get ready for the briefing."

\* \* \*

><p>We'd made our way up to Willis's quarters for a minute to make sure everything about our appearance was in order before returning to the main floor, where the briefing would be held. I'd also dumped my helmet, weapon, and pack in the room, tired of lugging it around, while Willis had enough time to get a shave in. His face was smooth now and up to standards, which would make our meeting with the higher-ups that much easier.<p>

When we finally walked in, we saw that Major Brewer and Lieutenant Lloyd were already waiting there, as was my husband's CO, Major Collins. I checked my watch to be sure we weren't late, and let out a mental sigh of relief when I saw that we weren't. Everyone else was just early.

"How many more are we expecting?" Willis asked the group beside me. It was Caleb who answered.

"Should be two more, sir. I heard we're getting a speech from the general in charge of groundside operations."

My husband frowned. "Who's the other?"

"Um, Commander - "

A man with the insignia of a major general walked into the room then, and all of us stood rapidly at attention, staring straight ahead. He took a moment to check out the location before finally glancing over at us. "At ease, Marines. Lieutenant."

All of us relaxed our postures, waiting to hear what he had to say. The general scratched at his head for a minute, then released a sigh and looked up.

"I'm Major General Nicholas Eckhart, commander of ground forces in the North American territory. I'm not going to sugarcoat it, ladies and gentlemen," he said, his expression grave. "The situation planetside is not going in our favor. And out here, things are very precarious. I'll explain why."

He pulled out his datapad and set it on the table, then projected an image that included Earth, its moon, and our listening post. The general began by zooming out and including the locations of the Home Fleet, our orbital defense platforms, and the enemy ship floating out in space. He pointed first to LP Alpha.

"This is where we are currently. Home Fleet is formed up here, here, and here, covering many possible angles - everything the orbital platforms can't handle on their own. We really don't have any expectations of getting overrun in space. The problem is that this ship that's positioned nearby...we're not too clear on why it's here. It appeared seemingly out of nowhere, we formed up an immediate defense, but so far it hasn't attacked us yet."

At that I frowned, folding my arms across my chest and stealing a quick glance at Willis. "Sir, if I may...in that case, what is it exactly that our Navy and pilots have been fighting up till now?"

"Mostly small Storm craft, Colonel. Lichs. Based on reports, apparently they came in with the large Promethean ship. We're not quite sure what the connection is there yet, but of course we have spooks and senior staff looking into it. Major Collins's air wing and several others have managed to stop many enemy aircraft from entering the atmosphere, but of course not all could be destroyed in time. That's where things get dicey for our ground troops."

"And the ship out here, sir?" Lloyd asked.

The major general turned to face him. "Obviously this is classified information that cannot leave this room, but we have a Special Forces operation getting underway now to attempt to board it, and thus gain the intel we need on why it's here."

The ONI operative nodded. "Yes, sir."

General Eckhart returned his attention to the projection. "Anyway, as I was saying, everything that's happening in orbit is having a ripple effect to our forces below. So far, we see no indication that the Promethean fighters groundside have any connection to the ship that's suddenly arrived upstairs. It seems to be just a terribly timed coincidence, since we know the enemy in the Carolinas emerged from

the portal on Requiem." I got the inevitable look in my direction. "Colonel, I heard you had your hands full out there. I'm sorry things came to this."

"No one more than me, sir," I replied.

The general nodded. "I don't doubt that. But now that the shit's here, we need to find a way to contain it, and ultimately stop it." Again he gestured to me. "That's where you come in, Cooper. You're going to be second-in-command down there."

"Yes, sir," I said, surprised. "Who's in charge planetside?"

"You'll be working with Brigadier General Aiden Bolowsky. Might've heard of him. He's pretty famous from the War."

A creeping grin formed on my face. I definitely remembered the name. "I have, sir. I was lucky enough to meet him several years ago. Good guy and a damn fine leader, General."

"That he is. It'll be up to the two of you, then, to keep the Promethean and Storm assault from spreading until we get things figured out upstairs."

"Understood, sir."

It was a huge undertaking and a massive responsibility, but with someone that well-known at the helm, I felt that our odds were pretty good. I still worried like crazy about my kids, and the amount of ground Willis had told me the enemy had already taken, but I was nothing if not determined to take it back.

"General, where is the 52nd deploying exactly?" Brewer asked then.

Eckhart cupped his chin in his hand. "Charleston, for now. The brass wants you right at the source to start, but realize that that may change as the battle goes on. HighCom definitely doesn't want to see the enemy go further south than Savannah, and if they need you more down in Georgia to stop that, that might just be where you get moved to later on. All depends on how things go." Yet again, the general turned to me. "The main thing is that we need that portal shut down yesterday, and the city cleared."

"Yes, sir," my XO and I said in unison.

"So, Collins and Hawk, now that the Onward Journey's brought back the remainder of your pilots, you'll have a full air wing again to go on the offensive. That's great news for us upstairs, in case that boarding mission doesn't go as planned. For now you'll stay here at Alpha on standby, awaiting orders in case the SpecOp gets rough. Colonel Cooper?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You and your Marines leave tonight. Lieutenant Lloyd and Lieutenant Commander Ackerson go with you. Questions?"

Beside me, I felt Willis immediately stiffen in anger at the name. Carefully and out of sight, I placed my hand on his arm to calm him



down.

"Sir, if I may ask, where is the lieutenant commander?" I said.  
"Shouldn't he have been here with us?"

"He requested that I brief him beforehand in private," General Eckart answered. "Out of respect for his late father, I honored his request."

Still confused, I pressed, "Did he give a reason, sir?"

"Nothing that is your concern, Colonel." He looked at all of us in turn then. "You're dismissed."

\* \* \*

><p>As soon as the briefing was over, I could tell something was brewing just beneath the surface. Willis had lost his cool and collected demeanor and was frowning now, brows knit, not saying a word.<p>

Then he finally spoke when we were once again walking down the hall.

"That fucking asshole didn't show up because of me," he said. "He's a damn coward, even now."

"We don't know that. The general wouldn't say what was up, and I suppose that's their business."

My husband came to a sudden halt and turned on me fast. "Are you defending that prick?"

"No," I responded, a little offended that he would think that. "I just meant it could've had something to do with the special op they're planning, or maybe something else we don't even - "

"What happened on Requiem, Natalie?"

Willis stood with his hands on his hips in front of me now, clearly agitated. It almost felt like he'd been wanting to ask me that question since we'd first seen each other, but had been too preoccupied or too emotional to see me again out of the blue to have given it much priority before. Now, it was obvious he wanted some answers.

In the moment I threw my hands up, beginning to get angry myself.  
"Jesus, Will. If you don't trust me by now, with someone like Ethan fucking Ackerson, I don't know what to tell you. Eleven years we've been married, and I've never given you a single reason to think -  
"

"I do trust you," my husband said grudgingly. "It's him I don't. He has a way of manipulating people and spinning his words that I just can't stand. And if he said or tried anything with you - "

My husband stopped mid-sentence then, and I wondered why until I slowly turned around.

Standing there in the hallway, wearing a wide smirk on his face, was

Ethan Ackerson himself.

### 37. Chapter 36: Repair

#### **\*\*Chapter Thirty-Six: Repair\*\***

Willis reacted a lot quicker than I would have thought possible at seeing Ethan again for the first time in nearly fifteen years. He swept past me in seconds and slammed Ethan into the wall of the corridor, both his fists balled up on the jacket of the ONI operative's fatigues.

It took me a moment to even take in what I was seeing. As soon as I did, I shouted, "Willis, what are you doing?"

He didn't seem to hear me, though; he only shoved Ethan harder.

"Stay away from my wife, do you understand?" my husband growled, looking my ex in the eyes. "You've done more than enough to her already."

Ethan met his gaze head-on, the smirk never leaving his face.

"William Hawk. It's been a while, huh?"

"Don't play games, Ethan. I mean it. I beat your ass once and I'm not afraid to do it again."

Ethan snorted. "Always the knight, am I right? So what happens now that she doesn't need one anymore? Is she free to choose herself?"

I saw the fire blaze hotter in Willis's eyes. "She chose me, a long damn time ago. Back off."

"Oh for God's sake," I said, finally getting between them. "This is ridiculous. No one, I repeat, no one, should be vying for my damn attention. That's been over for years. Ethan, I have a husband. That is it. Done. Willis, let him go. There's nothing for you two to fight over. And I think we have much bigger fish to fry right now."

Willis didn't seem willing to let it lie, though. "Natalie, how can you even - he beat you."

"Yes, he did. He paid for it. I've moved on, you've moved on, and so has he. What's the point in doing this all over again now? The past is over."

"So just like that? You don't care anymore?"

I snorted. "Believe me, I care, and I won't ever forget. It's just not something I want to keep dragging along behind me. I shed that part of myself many years ago, and I'm happy with that decision."

"But you'll talk to him and work with him, with no problems?"

"As long as those are my orders, yes. I can look out for myself."  
\_And he's not entirely what he used to be,\_ I thought.

Apparently my ex didn't know when the hell to shut up. His expression still hadn't changed. "You should listen to your wife, Hawk. She has a lot more sense than you."

That was Willis's final straw. He drew back to punch Ethan in the face, but I quickly intervened and yelled out, "\_Stop!\_"

My husband gave Ethan one last piercing glare, still gripping the front of his uniform, suddenly looking uncertain. In the meantime, I heaved a deep sigh of relief that no physical fight was going to take place over some male stupidity.

Before things could escalate again, I said, "Willis, leave."

He was so startled he let go of Ethan. "What?"

"You heard me. Go. I'm going to be taking off in a few hours to go planetside, and this is not how I want to be spending my time."

Willis scoffed. "Oh, but you'll spend it with him? Fine."

"Willis, that's not - ! Jesus."

He didn't remain to hear my reply. He'd already stormed off down the hallway.

When I turned to face Ethan again, he was looking as smug as ever.

"You know, unlike me and you, I don't think \_he's\_ really changed that much." He pushed off the wall and came a few steps closer. "Thanks for defending me, Cooper."

My voice took on a menacing tone then. I was pissed. "Ethan, if you fuck with my marriage, I swear to God I'll come after you myself. Do you understand?"

I didn't wait to hear whatever clever response he had waiting. Like Willis, I just left.

\* \* \*

><p>Before I could go try to patch things up with my husband, I needed a time-out myself. I was about to embark on another tough mission after a huge failure on my part, and I wasn't so sure I was mentally prepared for it, although I knew I needed to be. Getting to see Willis today had also been bittersweet, because we were reunited, yet soon to be split up once more.<p>

And now Ethan fucking Ackerson had come and thrown himself in the middle of it all. Likely just for sport.

I released a long sigh and sat inside the break room Willis and I had been in earlier for a while and just thought. It seemed the very moment something good finally happened, something wrong would immediately roll around and mess it up. I still had my kids to think

about, too, and I worried for their safety. Very soon, it was going to be up to me to make sure the combined Promethean/Storm threat never hit them.

Somehow, close to an hour passed. At the very least I needed a shower and a quick rest before I gathered up the troops pre-op, so I finally pushed myself up from the table and left.

\* \* \*

><p>I went up to Willis's quarters and entered the room quietly, in case he was asleep. He'd certainly looked tired enough all day. Much to my surprise, though - or maybe not, given the circumstances - he was lying down on the bunk, arms folded behind his head, staring up at the ceiling.<p>

For a moment I wasn't quite sure whether I should try to approach him or lie beside him, so I went for stepping closer but remained on my feet.

"Will, I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I don't know. For the mess. I know me working together with Ethan isn't ideal for either of us, but there's not a whole lot I can do about it."

My husband scoffed again. "You could have gone through the proper channels, Cooper, and let the brass know about your history. You two shouldn't even be in the same room together, let alone - "

I made my way over to the side of the bed and kissed him. I didn't know how else to make him see with only words. Then I pulled back a bit and cupped his smooth cheek. "I love you, Will. I love you and only you, and that's how it's always been. I think deep down you know that."

"Then why do you let him get away with his crap?"

"Do you really want to know?" I asked him. I released a sigh. "Because I want to show him that I'm not afraid anymore, and that he didn't win. I won't run from him. And I know it's hard to believe, but he has changed, Willis. Even if only a little. For him, it's been a pretty decent improvement. I want this to be behind us."

Willis didn't say anything right away, and I took that as a cue to give him his space back. Finally he answered me with a question disguised as statement.

"You never told me what happened on Requiem."

"Nothing," I replied.

He seemed to hesitate before his next inquiry. "Did you want it to?"

"No," I said in a sigh. "I missed you and that's what I told him. That we were solid and not to expect that to change."

There was long beat of silence, then, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"You said nothing happened, and that you didn't want anything to happen. I believe you." He finally sat up a little and looked over at me. "I told you, Natalie. I trust you."

I wasn't sure why but I suddenly had a creeping grin forming on my face. "Does that mean we can get some sleep now before I have to leave?"

Slowly, my husband smiled back. "I don't know about \_sleep\_, but you can definitely get over here."

### 38. Chapter 37: Marching On 1

Author's Note: Thanks so much for all the wonderful reviews, guys! It was very awesome to see my inbox get bombarded last week, lol, especially since I've been under the weather this week. I appreciate all your comments, and I'm really glad you're enjoying the story so much. It makes this endeavor worthwhile and gives me lots of drive to keep on truckin'. :D

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Thirty-Seven: Marching On, Part One<span>\*\*

I woke up to my husband trailing his fingers softly down my bare back, enjoying the sensation when he leaned down to press his lips between my shoulders. For a moment I smiled in contentment, even in my sleepy state, before remembering what lay ahead of us. I shifted slightly in the bunk and mumbled, "Is it that time already?"

Willis responded with another gentle kiss that made me shiver, this time centered on my spine. "Yeah. Sorry, Coop. I know you didn't get much rest."

I cracked an eye open and turned my head in his direction. "That might have something to do with how irresistible you are. It's your fault."

He chuckled and leaned in closer, hugging my back to his naked chest. "I could say the same thing about you."

I turned over completely this time so I was facing him fully, and kissed him hard on the lips. Leaving again so soon after just getting back was going to be tougher than I thought.

Willis followed with a deep kiss that I badly wanted to return, but instead I forced myself to pull back. I had very little time now before the operation planetside was to start, and I still had some things to get done before then. Things that did not involve lounging in bed with my husband, no matter how much I would've liked the luxury. We'd been lucky we'd had as much time to ourselves as we'd already gotten.

"I need to get going," I said to him.

"I know," he replied.

Reluctantly I separated myself from his embrace and stood, looking around his cramped quarters for my clothes so I could throw them on on my way to the shower. I dressed in my undergarments and PT shorts, then decided to pull on Willis's discarded T-shirt for now. He frowned at me as he sat up in the bed, but it was feigned.

"What am I supposed to wear?"

"I'll be right back. Your squadron was placed on standby, so you're not in as much of a hurry."

"Uh-huh."

"Five minutes. Promise."

I did just that, getting back into my own shirt and fatigues when I returned. Willis was still lying in the bunk and I envied him a little for it, but I knew he'd been fighting almost the entire time my Marines and I had been en route from Requiem. He deserved a good rest - and now that I was leaving for Earth's surface, he'd be able to get it.

"I'm going to head to the mess and grab a quick bite before take-off," I told him as I sat on the chair beside his desk to lace up my combat boots. "Do you want to come with?"

He shook his head. "No. I need to shower myself first and that'll probably eat up too much of your time. I know you're pressed for it."

A lump formed in my throat, but I understood. I nodded and got to my feet. "This is it, then. Hopefully I'll see you planetside soon. That'll mean the SpecOps mission aboard that Promethean ship worked out."

"Yeah. I hope it all goes well, too."

I went over to the side of the bed and kissed him, touching my hand to his cheek. He kissed me back.

"I love you, Cooper. Stay safe."

"I love you, too. Try not to fall out of the sky again, please."

He smiled faintly and released me. "I'll let you know when we're in atmosphere."

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye."

I quickly picked up my gear and left the room. Once outside, I had to swallow hard to keep the hurt from engulfing me.

Always coming back together just to be split apart again, I thought. Story of our damn lives.

\* \* \*

><p>"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. Welcome. I hear you're my new XO."<p>

As soon as Brewer, Lloyd, and I had touched down near Charleston, South Carolina - along with a squadron of Pelicans bringing in the remainder of the 52nd Combat Regiment groundside - I quickly got off the transport and hoofed it over to the command tent. There, I met up with the famous brigadier general himself - the man I'd met briefly five years ago, before our final assault in Kenya.

I took his hand and shook it. "Yes, sir. That's what General Eckhart told me on the LP."

"I trust he also gave you a preliminary assessment of the area? Things've gotten pretty hot down here."

"My husband let me know, actually. He's a pilot with the 87th Air Wing."

"Oh. Well, godspeed to them, too."

"Thank you, sir."

He momentarily frowned. "Is the 87th planetside? I haven't seen them mentioned in the roster reports."

"No, sir. Not yet. They're up above near Luna right now, keeping an eye on that Promethean ship that just arrived. They'll be making sure it doesn't cause us any trouble down here."

"Right. I'm sure the two of you will be wanting to catch up again sooner rather than later, so let's try to get this done quickly."

"That's the plan, sir."

General Bolowsky gestured for me to step forward then and I did, following him a bit further into the tent where a holotable was set up. He pressed a few buttons on the side and a visual map of the southeastern United States popped up. "Your flyboy tell you the Prometheans have covered a lot of ground here recently? That most of the largest cities in the eastern part of the state are under their control?"

"Yes, sir. General Eckhart said they're as far south as Savannah, Georgia now."

"That's right. As you probably know, Colonel, our job is going to be to take these population centers back."

"Sir? My orders were to try to eliminate the portal here in Charleston first."

Bolowsky smiled patiently. "I'm aware. You're correct that that's your most immediate concern. But I was talking about the bigger picture, Cooper. As my XO, you're not just going to be responsible for your own regiment. You're going to affect the execution and the outcome of this entire campaign."

I didn't allow myself too much time to let that sink in, for fear of looking dumbstruck in front of the general. So instead I replied simply, "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now - "

"Sorry, sir, but just one question," I interjected then. "Weren't there any full birds available to take my position? I mean, I just got back from deployment this afternoon, sir, and I'm not sure if you've heard, but I made a pretty big fuck up out of it." I took a deep breath. "\_I'm\_ the reason the Prometheans are here in the first place, General."

Bolowsky nodded. "I know."

"Then why - "

"You were a student at the Pensacola War College before you left for Requiem, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you already have a leg up on the next candidates for this position. My XO was Colonel Mike Fabri, and he was killed in action two days into the assault." The general gave me a look. "I don't know about you, but I'll take a live LTC over a dead O-6 any day. And the two others at your rank...well, let's just say I read through your CSV, and they don't come close. Satisfied?"

Somehow I felt like I was being made to feel silly - and the general more than accomplished that. "Yes, sir," I repeated.

"Excellent. Now, back to what I was saying earlier. Take a look at these unit postings, Cooper, and tell me what you see."

I folded my arms across my chest and studied the holographic map. For the longest time I wasn't sure what it was he wanted me to notice, until a pattern appeared in my head.

"The Prometheans are all in the city, while the Storm troops that made it in atmosphere are clustered around the outskirts."

"Exactly. Now why do you suppose that would be?"

"I don't know, sir. Keeping us contained?"

"Perhaps. What I figure though is that it's the AI-bots who want to wreak havoc on the population and cause the largest disruptions, partially because of the size of their force. The Storm that came in were a smaller contingent, so it would make sense for them to take on less dense locations, yeah?"

"Yes, sir. So...what are we going to do about that?"

The general smiled faintly again. "You tell me. Let's hear your plan, Colonel."

"Sir, this is a little outside my purview..."



"Go ahead. I promise to amend it if it's not up to snuff, but I think you could bring in some fresh perspective. I'm all ears."

Frowning, I shifted a bit and scrutinized the map again, trying to come up with a good defensive option for our forces. Or maybe that was it: not going on defense, like most would do, but attempting to gain the upper hand and go on offense instead.

"Okay," I said. "Looking at the way the enemy units are scattered like that...it might be a good idea to eliminate the threats from outside the city before going in. If we can clear the outskirts, we'll have more room to maneuver and more manpower when we go into the cities, since our forces won't be locked up fighting in two different locations. Sir."

General Bolowsky nodded. "All right. And how about a timetable? We don't want to keep the cities under Promethean control for long, so this'll have to be wrapped up fast around the perimeter if we're to secure the urban areas in time. What's your contingency for that?"

Somehow it all seemed to come to me clearly. "Bombing runs, sir. We soften up the targets on the outskirts, mop 'em up quick with our assault force, and head right into the city."

This time, Bolowsky grinned. "Very good, Colonel. Now, are you ready to go out and try it?"

The stakes were high, and I knew this was no war game or made-up scenario like I'd had at the War College. We were dealing with a real invasion here, with real cities and real people's lives - both civilian and military - who would face the consequences if I was wrong. But in the moment I felt nothing if not determined to beat each and every last one of the bots and aliens off our home turf. I nodded.

"Yes, sir. Just give me the word and the 52nd will be on the move."

\* \* \*

><p>General Bolowsky was the one who did most of the prep work for my idea. He was the one who relayed my plan - now my orders - to the rest of the command group, let any units currently involved know to stay out of the area, and got the air wing on standby ready. For my part, I issued orders to the mortar teams that were to supply us with additional firepower in getting the outskirts cleared, and gave explicit orders to my own regiment to just sit tight and stay put for now. From this moment forward, it was going to be the flyboys' and mortarmen's show for a while.<p>

"Hold tight, Marines," I said over the general COM freq. "Orders to follow."

I glanced over at Bolowsky once everything was in place, which had taken the better part of an hour in order to get that many units arranged on such short notice. We were digging in deep for this one, and I wanted to make sure it was all done right. I simply could not take another failure on my part.

The brigadier general gave me a slight nod of his head from across the holotable. "Whenever you're ready, Colonel."

In the moment I thought of my two boys and little girl down at the airbase in Florida - just a hop, skip, and a jump from where the Prometheans were now - and of my husband up above in space. I took in a deep breath to steady my nerves, then keyed the COM again.

"This is Ground Command to Air Team - you're free to begin your runs. Lay 'em down hot, Marines!"

It was eerily quiet for the briefest of seconds after I gave the command. We knew we didn't have to wait long for the F-41s to show up on our position, and we didn't. Soon, the command tent shook and the ground quaked slightly, before we finally heard the sound of tens of Broadwords on approach.

Bolowsky tipped his chin to me. "Cooper, I'd like you and your security to head out and get a live-feed going for us in here. Let's see what the bombers drop."

"Yes, sir," I answered immediately. I was grateful for something to do other than just stand there and sweat bullets.

Outside the tent I regrouped with Staff Sergeant Lynch and his squad, as well as Major Brewer and Lieutenant Lloyd. Once again, Ethan was mysteriously absent, as he'd been up on the listening post, but I knew for a fact he'd made it planetside so he couldn't have been far. I mentally pushed the thought away though, realizing he wasn't my concern for the moment, and settled for taking a perch behind a low brick wall to watch.

What I wanted most right now - besides getting in on the action myself - was to hold onto my rifle, but it wouldn't do me much good this far out anyway. Instead, I kept my weapon strapped to my back and tapped the side of my helmet, and my cam feed started to record our Broadwords swooping in to devastate.

"This is different than Kenya, huh?" Brewer asked beside me, also fixing her gaze above us. "There, this whole part was already done for us. We got in only after they'd wrecked the place. Now, we get a front-row seat."

"You were in Africa in '53 for the last push?"

My XO smiled proudly. "Yes, ma'am. Won't ever forget it."

I nodded. "Me, either. I hope they give 'em hell."

The first of the bombs were dropped and began detonating just outside Charleston. Up above, all we heard was a constant repeat of sonic booms, as wave after wave of F-41s rushed in to join in the attack. The hulking payloads they let loose tore into buildings, fields, businesses, and homes with earnest, an equal-opportunity demolition crew. It was both awe-inspiring and terrifying to watch, and I smirked at the thought of how many Storm were getting blown to bits down there. But as I sat there crouched safely behind the low brick wall, miles away, I also wondered how frightened the people left in the city were feeling right now.

Or maybe they were feeling relieved. I hoped they did.

\_Relieved because the Marines are coming,\_ I thought. \_And we're coming to take your city back.\_

### 39. Chapter 38: Marching On 2

Author's Note: This took forever to get out. I'm so sorry! Real life got super busy all of a sudden, and it hasn't let up that much the past few months. I'm going to try hard to be better about this.

Anyway, enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Thirty-Eight: Marching On, Part Two<span>\*&#177;

\*\*0417 Hours, September 21, 2558. Near the City of Charleston, South Carolina, United States. "The Reentry," Planet Earth. Day Sixty-Four of the War of Tomorrow\*\*

Our pilots and mortarmen finally stopped laying down heavy ordnance about an hour or two before sunrise. I'd been outside much of the night providing a view for the command team inside the tent, but I'd also slipped in myself from time to time to give my input while my XO took on recording duties. Overall, it'd been a long, sleepless night as we waited for dawn - and as our air support planetside made mince meat out of the Storm presence surrounding the city. I expected nothing less awaited us near the advent of day.

"Colonel Cooper," General Bolowsky remarked when I returned to the tent again. "You look tired."

"Good to go, sir," I replied, holding my helmet in one hand with my BR still slung behind my back. I glanced vaguely at the holotable between us. "The 52nd's ready to move out as soon as you give the word."

\_Can't really afford to be tired before the fighting even starts,\_ I thought to myself, although I was. I'd been practically up for over twenty-four hours straight by now, first from overseeing my regiment's needs before we arrived on Earth, then from the briefing and the...quality time I'd spent with Willis. All told I'd gotten maybe a couple hours of sleep in his quarters earlier, if that. I knew that for now I'd just have to continue on without.

Bolowsky seemed to nod to himself. "All right. I'm just waiting on word from the air commander that we're all clear, and then I'm sending you in."

"Yes, sir."

Rather than stand there impatiently in front of the general, I excused myself and stepped back outside to gather my team and make sure everyone was prepared for what lay ahead. I found my XO standing beside her husband, both appearing to review the same feed from the night before. Cal was holding his datapad out between them, and it

looked like he'd taken over recording duties now.

As I approached, the Navy lieutenant glanced up, saw me, and quickly flagged me over.

"Colonel, I think we might've found something."

I jogged over fast. "Show me. We're almost up."

Caleb nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Major Brewer and I were just going over the feed from last night. We saw...something that might be of interest here to Command."

"What is it?"

Brewer spoke up next, pointing at the device in Lloyd's hand. "This, ma'am. Caleb, bring up the twenty-seventh mark of hour six."

"Got it."

The lieutenant cycled back a significant portion of the feed until he got to the right time in the video. Then he hit play, and the three of us watched.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first. Just the usual sights and sounds of a heavy, continuous bombing. I didn't notice anything until a couple more minutes in - it was a sudden stream of bright light shooting outward parallel to the ground. Definitely not something that would appear as a normal part of an explosion, which would instead burst upward and out.

I had Lieutenant Lloyd pause the video immediately. "Okay. I saw it, too. What the fuck was that?"

Cal shook his head. "Don't know, ma'am. But my best guess would be that that's where the portal is."

I scrutinized the still frame again. The light was coming from the northwest - more towards Walterboro. I folded my arms across my chest. "So that's where we'll head first."

"Colonel...like I said, I'm not sure about - "

"Cal, I trust you, and I trust your gut. Right now we don't have another clear starting point, and if that's where the enemy's coming in, we need it gone yesterday. Get me the coordinates and I'll let General Bolowsky know that's where we're going."

Having the portal's location - even if it was just probable - was a good beginning to the operation. But we had a long way to go from here to liberate the city.

I walked back to the command tent, eager to get things started.

"Sir, I just spoke to Lieutenant Lloyd and my XO outside. We may have caught the portal in the cam feed from the bombing last night."

Bolowsky looked surprised at first, then relieved. "That's excellent

to hear, Cooper. I've got more good news for you."

"Sir?"

His lips curved upward, but it wasn't quite a smile. "I just spoke to the air team. Your regiment is free to advance."

\* \* \*

><p>"Weapons hot, Marines! Get in those 'Hogs and let's move!"<p>

Fresh off a night of light sleep - just like me - my Marines of the 52nd Regiment still geared up and piled into troop vehicles and onto the rear-mounted MGs with purpose. I liked to think it was because they were well-disciplined, and they were, but I also knew that they all felt how high the stakes were with this second invasion of Earth. At least it was on a much smaller scale this time, but no less deadly to the citizens and military personnel in its path. I tried hard not to think about the fact that that might include my kids soon, as well.

\_I won't let that happen,\_ I thought. \_Not ever.\_

In the middle of the chaos of over one thousand Marines getting prepped for battle, Majors Harris, Brewer, and Delaney all came up beside me before they left.

"Ma'am. Anywhere in particular you want us in the formation?" Harris, my former XO, asked.

I nodded to the side. "You and Brewer've got the left flank, Shawn. When we head into the city, I'll need you right behind Dani's batt. Once we get inside we may need to set up some temporary shelters for the civvies in there. It looks the Prometheans and Storm may've decimated a lot already."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Me, Colonel?" Delaney asked.

"You'll follow me and Lieutenant Lloyd on the right. We think we may have found the portal's entry point, and I want it gone fast. So does the brass. Think you can manage?"

"Of course, ma'am. We'll be on your six."

"Good. Let's move out, then, and semper fi."

"Oorah!"

My senior officers and I split apart then. After waiting a long while for the first few platoons of Marines to drive off in the jeeps, I finally rapped Staff Sergeant Lynch on the back of his body armor and said, "Staff, we've got the next one. Let's hop in."

I was expecting to get a troop 'Hog for my security detail, but Lynch insisted it'd be safer - and less conspicuous - if we took one of the ones with a heavy gun in the back. That meant my security would split up, but so long as Lynch was driving, I felt safe enough. A young

corporal from my detail took over gunner duty, and I climbed into the passenger seat. We were all set to drive off when I heard someone pound on the bumper.

"Hold the 'Hog, Staff Sergeant!" a familiar voice called out. "I'm jumping in back."

"Sir, there's not a whole lot of room - "

"There's enough, Staff. I'm already on. Floor it."

It was Ethan. He'd suddenly and very conveniently just reappeared out of nowhere. I felt my blood boil, but in the interest of not making a scene, said nothing. Lynch just looked to me for approval first, and I nodded. "Let's roll."

The large, unwieldy vehicle got moving then, with a rapid spin of the tires in the ground before it lurched forward.

During the drive I was silent, keeping my rifle up and trained on the terrain to the side of us, not expecting much enemy activity after the prolonged bombing, but ready for it nonetheless. I tried my best not to be too conscious of Ethan sitting behind me, cramped into the back with the gunner and our supplies, but that was his fucking problem. If he'd wanted marginally more comfortable seating, there'd been plenty of other jeeps to take into the fight.

"I have to say, Cooper, I really enjoyed my time on the listening post," Ethan said, abruptly opening a private channel between us. "Your Willis got a lot more pissed off at seeing me than I thought possible after all these years."

I snorted. "He's not \_'mine'\_. And I think he'll always be angry about what happened, with good reason. It definitely doesn't help when you egg him on."

"With good reason...you mean because he didn't stop it?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You used to visit his sister a lot when we were going out. I remember she was your best friend at the time. I can only assume Willis was there when you went over. And yet he didn't notice what was happening?"

"I think you hit your head. He did notice and put a stop to it."

"Not for a while."

That was true, but it hadn't been Willis's fault. I'd been good at hiding the bruises.

"So the real question is, is he mad at me? Or mad at himself?" Ethan mused.

Finally, I was exasperated. "\_Why\_ are we doing this right now? What are you getting at?"

"Just an observation."

I gripped my weapon tighter, still looking down the sights. "Right. Nothing's ever \_'just'\_ anything with you." A sudden thought came to mind. "Where were you during the briefing?"

He sounded smug. "Why? Miss me?"

"Hardly."

"You were thinking of me, though." He released a sigh. "I had a talk with General Eckhart privately about a classified operation underway. Spook stuff, you know. But I have to admit, it was nice to have the added bonus of getting Willis riled up. He probably thought I did it to avoid him, didn't he?"

Though I wasn't sure how he'd deduced that, I didn't give him the satisfaction of answering either way. Instead, I said, "Why does it amuse you so much to be a complete dickhead, Ethan? You know if I hadn't stopped Willis today, he would've gotten in big trouble for hurting you." That's the last thing my husband would've needed, too. Getting grounded just after having finally gotten his wings back - and right during an invasion. It was the real reason I hadn't wanted him to hit Ethan.

There was a short pause, then, "I wanted to see if he would still win."

I was about to reply to that absurdity when the 'Hog suddenly pitched right. I was nearly thrown out of the open-air vehicle but caught myself on the overhead bar just in time, holding onto my rifle with my right hand.

"Ma'am, hold on!" Staff Sergeant Lynch yelled out belatedly. "Here come the stragglers!"

Lances of hot plasma began peppering the air and earth around us, some splashes hitting the side of the 'Hog and nearly getting close enough to sear flesh. I was glad it wasn't warm enough to roll up our sleeves, or all of us would've seen fat patches of sunburns on our skin. I ducked my head as the bolts came in, as did everyone else, then sat up straighter to return fire.

"Get a lock and let's nail 'em! Go!" I shouted.

The corporal finally opened up with the MG in the back, and I could hear the constant rattling of the heavy gun drowning out almost everything else because of its proximity. My helmet's systems managed to dampen the sound so that it wasn't painful, but I heard nothing else until the general COM freq crackled.

"52nd Actual, be advised: your top grid just hit enemy territory," the voice said. It was overwatch - someone back at the command tent watching the assault through the vid feeds.

I held back a snort. "Roger that, Overwatch. We're in the shit, too. Standby."

In the meantime, the tracers were lighting up the early morning darkness with precision; our gunner was good. Soon the small Storm contingent attacking us from the right flank was gone, nothing but

bloodied alien corpses littering the dawn landscape.

"Woo!" the young corporal whooped once they were down. "Blew right through those bastards!"

"Lock it up!" Ethan yelled, more harshly than I thought he should have. "This isn't a game, Corporal. Use your head, and stay sharp. There's always more."

"Y-yes, sir."

"And remember that you're responsible for protecting the colonel's life, not clowning around. Act like it."

"Of course, sir. Sorry."

Now rebuked, I heard the gunner in the back settle in. I keyed the COM to my private channel with Ethan again and said, "Was that necessary?"

"He's not taking his job seriously, so yes. I don't want you getting killed because of some kid who thinks he's just out here for a joyride."

"My security detail is very good at what they do, considering how difficult I make it for them all the time," I said. "And since when do you care what happens to me?"

"I care."

He said it quietly but firmly, and didn't waste time on more words. I still wasn't sure whether I should believe it, given that I felt he'd rattled the cage between Willis and I just because he could, and because he found it fun. But there was a conviction in his voice that I couldn't readily dismiss, either.

Ethan, I thought. Just as complicated as ever.

We hit a huge pothole then and bounced. I grunted at the motion, which sent sharp spikes of pain through my old needler wounds, and gripped the overhead bar once again to keep from getting thrown.

"Sorry, ma'am," Staff Sergeant Lynch cried through the sounds of battle up ahead. "That was one of the blast craters from the jets. We'll be hitting a lot more of them up ahead, so hang on."

The more we progressed, the more blackened and beat up the ground looked - but I also saw that more of the Remnant had survived than previously thought. I watched as some of the Warthogs up ahead were stalled against heavy enemy fire. And then one of them, just a hundred meters in front of us, suddenly went up in flames. The Marines inside screamed over the radio as they jumped out, burning as they rolled onto the dirt. I shut my eyes tight for a brief moment, my chest clenching at the sights and sounds.

"What was that?" I asked, and Ethan answered, calm and unaffected as always.

"Ex-Covie sniper. Must've hit the fuel tank." To the staff sergeant,



he said, "Lynch, avoid the wreckage. Storm might want to check it out."

"Yes, sir."

The MG behind me went loud again as we got closer; there were indeed several Storm troops charging the burning 'Hog and torched bodies, but they were pumped full of lead by our gunner and another Marine further to our left. I lifted my BR and shot off several bursts as well, tagging a few Grunts and an Elite. They hadn't had a chance to fire back. I tapped the side of my helmet to bring up a mini-map in one of the corners of my HUD, checking our coordinates.

"Staff, get ready to veer left," I said to him, watching our progress on the small square image. "Let the rest of security know, too. We need to head to that portal." \_Or where it might be,\_ I amended to myself.

"Got it, Colonel. I got the rest of the team on our heels."

By now there was so much commotion in front of and behind us and really, all around us, that it was easy to lose orientation. We would've been in a jam without our electronics at this point. But then something happened that even those couldn't help us out with - a loud \_schwoop\_ came through the air.

"\_Wraith!\_" someone yelled over the COM.

I think Lynch saw the orb heading toward us because he slammed on the brakes so hard we almost all got tossed out like rag dolls again. I never saw a damn thing, too focused on the side to look up in time. The next thing I knew I was flying, holding my gun tight against my chest, and I hit the ground hard and rolled for what seemed like an eternity.

All my bells were ringing when I blinked down at the dirt once I came to a stop, and I groaned. I felt mostly in one piece and didn't notice any burns, but I was aching everywhere and my old wounds were giving me hell. There was copper in my mouth and I grimaced as I involuntarily swallowed it down. The next time it bubbled up I spat it out, just in time to get grabbed roughly by the shoulders and dragged away.

I coughed on the blood, then croaked out, "What - "

"It's me," the voice said, and I quickly recognized it as Ethan. "'Hog's in bad shape, ma'am. We need to get you out of the open."

I didn't have much choice at the moment than to go along with it, until I felt him prop me up against something metal. The Warthog, I noticed when my vision cleared. It was smoking but still in one piece - albeit heavily damaged.

"Don't worry, it won't blow," my ex said, anticipating my thought. "It's just the back end that took some heat from the blast. The corporal...he didn't make it."

"How did you - and Lynch?"

"I got thrown out beforehand. The staff sergeant is a little beat up

but fine. We really need to - "

Another \_schwoop\_ was heard up above. Ethan wasted no time on speech, instead wrapping his body around me against the vehicle to shield me from what was sure to be another hard hit.

The enemy mortar round didn't disappoint. The earth shook at the impact, and not too far away, I heard another group of scattered Marines cry out at the blast. I hated to think what must've happened to them. In the next moment, Ethan's body had disappeared from around me, and I was being jerked to my feet.

"As I was saying, we need to move, Nat. On foot right now if we have to, but it'd be best if we caught a ride. That tank's got it dialed in for us."

I moved with him, but not very far. I stumbled as the ground spun beneath my boots, taking Ethan down with me, and that's what ended up saving both our lives. Plasma and needler fire were coming from the side as the Storm fighters on foot took shots at us, too. The boiling rounds whizzed just above our heads, where we'd been standing seconds before.

"Shit!" Ethan cried out. "That's not a good way to go!"

"We need to get them first, sir!" I heard Lynch yell from close by. I turned and saw him running up behind the 'Hog now as well, weaving to avoid the incoming rounds and stopping once to let loose a quick burst from his SAW. Two jackals hit the ground, dead, but there were more of them aiming at us.

"No! We can't stay here! This - "

\_Schwoop!\_

Even amidst the gunfire, Ethan took off at a sprint, pulling me roughly to my feet again and then letting me loose to run, too. The staff sergeant bit off an angry curse and quickly chased after us. That was it. There was no staying behind the cover of the jeep any longer. Either we got hit by enemy rounds or we got blown to bits. In this particular case, I was with Ethan. I'd take my chances getting shot.

"Watch the craters!" my ex warned, and if I'd been feeling a little better, I would have laughed. A broken ankle was by far the least of our concerns right now.

And that's when it hit me.

"Ethan, the craters! Make for it! We'll hunker down there!"

"Colonel, are you sure?"

"Do it!"

So we jumped down into the next biggest hole we could find. It was blackened with debris and still warm, but it did the trick. For the moment, we were out of harm's way, as the Wraith tank continued to target the overturned 'Hog back where we'd been.

In the meantime, I'd gotten most of my faculties back. It didn't feel like the earth was moving below me, and I could turn my head without wanting to throw up. I took the time to first check the load on my battle rifle, then glance at my HUD. We were still on track towards the probably portal's coordinates. But now we had no way of getting there.

That's when my COM crackled. "52nd Actual, this is Overwatch. We lost you on the screen. Big Bear wants to know your position."

"Overwatch, 52nd Actual," I responded, pausing just long enough to spit out more blood from my mouth that had collected as I ran. I wiped my lips with my sleeve before going on. "We got hit by mortar fire and need pickup. Transport's no longer viable."

"Roger, what's your sitrep?"

"Tell the general we're green."

"Got it. We'll see if we can get you moving again, wait one."

"Overwatch?"

"Go ahead, Actual."

"I don't know if you can see it on your screens, but there's a Wraith that's been hounding us. That's what took out our 'Hog. Any chance you can get rid of it?"

"Sorry, Actual. No air support is available just yet after all those runs last night. But I'll get a gauss cannon on it."

"Perfect. 52nd out."

Ethan turned to me as soon as I cut the connection, using our private channel again. "Well?"

"Looks like we're on our own for a bit," I said, shifting onto my stomach then from my back and crawling up the dirt to the rim of the crater, poking my rifle up from the edge. "I don't think we should stay here long, though. My guess is that we'll be re-engaged by the roving Storm troops any minute."

"So what's the plan?"

"We keep low and wait for the tank to go down," I said, using my scope to dial in on some of the approaching enemies I could already see in the growing morning light, before they spotted me. "Then, jeep or not, we move."

\_It's going to be a long day,\_ I thought. This is definitely not how I'd been expecting to start off the assault.

But that's what made us Marines.

"Adapt and survive," I murmured under my breath.

"What?" Ethan asked. He was a swabbie and didn't know, but Lynch did.

"Oorah, Colonel," the staff sergeant replied.

I motioned to him then from my position. "Get up here, Derek. I have a feeling that we're going to need that SAW."

#### 40. Chapter 39: Particulates

**\*\*Chapter Thirty-Nine: Particulates\*\***

**\*\*0459 Hours, September 21, 2558. UNSC Listening Post Alpha One, Near Luna. "The Game," Planet Earth. Day Sixty-Four of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

Willis woke up early, alone in his bunk. He ran a hand over his face and released a breath as he grew more alert, acutely aware of the fact that his wife was no longer there to share his bed. She'd left yesterday for the surface, and since then, it had been a long and restless waiting game for the major. \_Like the kind I've already been playing for months, hoping I'd get better,\_ he thought to himself. \_And now here I am finally ready to go, and we get put on standby.\_

The reprieve had been nice at first, and so was having his first good night's rest in weeks. But now, after all that, he was ready to get back in on the action. He'd been forced to be dormant for too long before that. A small part of him almost - \_almost\_ - wished something would happen on the mysterious Promethean ship, just so he could get back out there again.

Eventually, he rolled over and picked up his datapad from the nightstand, hoping for some sort of message from Collins - a sitrep, anything. It was blank.

Hawk found the lack of news frustrating. He wondered what was happening on the ground, too, since both Natalie and his brother were there. \_Hope it's all good,\_ he thought, although he knew it couldn't be. In the end he tried to tell himself no news was good news, and he swung his legs over the side of the bed, intent on heading to the mess for some coffee and chow to get his brain in gear. The only thing he could think of to occupy his time - and his mind - after that was going to the gym. So when he rose, he dressed in his PT clothes and headed down the hall.

The major ate in silence and kept to himself, leaving his datapad squarely on the table beside him in case he was called at the last second to help in orbit, which he still might be. He polished off his full plate and downed his coffee without so much as a ping coming in.

He sat on the bench for five whole minutes after he was finished, looking at the device, willing it to offer up some kind of update, until he realized how silly he was being and got up to throw his trash away. On his way to the gym he stopped once more at his quarters to pick up a fresh towel, then continued on.

Thanks to his last name and rank insignia stamped onto his gray

UNSC-MC T-shirt, he got a few salutes on his way. He was glad to be rid of the formalities once he got into the exercise space and sighed, setting his sights on the stretching mat to start. That's when Willis saw him.

Major Hawk's former wingmate and once-best friend was in the back of the small compartment, lifting weights on a bench on his own - no spotter. Willis snorted. \_Stupid hare-brained Brandon. He's going to hurt his damn self. And in a way, it'll be cosmic justice.\_

He ignored his ex-buddy, who hadn't seen him walk in, and got on a treadmill instead, pumping it up as high as it would go. It was one of those mornings.

In a few minutes he was pounding the belt hard, but he noticed that Captain Heat had just finished his reps, sweat soaking through most of the top of his shirt. The other pilot grabbed the towel from around his neck and mopped up the perspiration from his face, then started heading for the exit. He'd almost walked by when he turned and spotted Willis.

The two men stared at one another until Heat took a hesitant step forward.

"Hey, Willis. I heard you were back on duty. Congrats. Must feel good, right?"

Hawk remained silent.

Brandon snorted. "Silent treatment, huh? Learn that from the wife?"

The idea was so absurd the words just spilled out. "When have you \_ever\_ known Cooper to keep her concerns to herself?"

Heat laughed. "Honestly, never. She'll get in anyone's face about anything if something's not right. Ain't nothing silent about that." He moved the towel he was holding to one side of his shoulders. "And that's why I like her. She complements your quiet ass."

Willis said nothing this time. What were you supposed to say to someone who'd almost torn a huge chunk of your life away?

"Hey, man, listen. About Khan..."

"I don't want to hear it."

"Willis, come on - "

"You nearly \_killed\_ me, you know that?" Hawk said, with a lot more bite in his tone than he'd meant to have. "Should I ever forgive you for getting \_this\_ close to taking me away from my wife and kids? And how about being grounded for \_months\_? Realistically, I didn't think I'd \_ever\_ get back here. And I would've had you to thank for it."

"I said I was sorry, buddy, and it was a messed up accident. I know it was awful and I can't begin to imagine what you've gone through, but in the end, that's all it was. I hope you'll accept that someday, like Natalie has."

"\_Natalie\_ has a heart of fucking gold, and has forgiven a lot worse. But she didn't have to live through the uncertain hell I did since the crash. You blew it, Heat." Although technically, that last wasn't entirely true. Cooper had suffered over his condition, too. She'd tried to hide it, but he knew her well and could see it. The uncertainty and the loss of something so core to Hawk's being had been a hard pill for her to swallow as well. It was miraculous and good on a lot of fronts that things had finally turned out the way they did.

In front of him, Captain Heat swallowed. "Look, I just - you're better now, and we'll both be out there together. I just wanted you to know that I have your back. I hope you have mine, too, even if you don't feel like being my friend anymore. All right?"

Willis looked at him for a long time before finally nodding. "Fine. Just around here, stay out of my way."

"If that's what you want, bro, you'll have it. Have a good workout."

The captain opened up the hatch and walked out of the gym. Willis shook his head to himself, then ran faster.

\* \* \*

><p>Major Hawk had just gotten out of the shower after his run and some weight-lifting reps when his datapad buzzed. Still wet with a large towel draped around his lower body, held up by a fist, Willis ran his other hand through his short, light brown hair before answering. "Major Hawk."<p>

"Check your messages, Willis," Major Collins said. "I just sent you three. All situation reports are there, regarding the orbital defense and the ground fight."

Willis's blood ran cold. "Natalie or Matthew?"

"Nothing on the lieutenant colonel or the private, so I'm assuming they're fine. Although your wife's unit is on the move. Read up, quickly."

"Why 'quickly'?"

"Because you'll see that the operation on the Promethean ship has not been going as planned. The 87th is needed in space in ten minutes."

\* \* \*

><p>True to his word, Hawk had gone through the files fast and dressed even faster once back in his quarters. In less than eight minutes, he was on the flight deck, standing beside his bird and his CO. He had his helmet over his head, gripping it in both hands, about to pull it on. This was it.<p>

"Any final updates?"

"None yet," Major Collins responded.

"Okay. So this \_Mantle's Approach\_..."

"We still don't know what it's here for," Collins said. "The Special Forces team was only able to get the name, and confirm that it's of Promethean origin. They're not sure of its capabilities yet, but I was told that one of the spooks onboard with the SpecOps team found something disturbing. Something they need more hands on deck for on the outside. We have strict orders to not let that ship reach the atmosphere - or the orbital platforms."

"Roger that. Good luck, Flight Leader."

"You, too, Gold. I'll see you when we land."

Willis brought the helmet down over his face then and heard the seal shut with a light \_click\_. He hustled up to his craft and loaded up. Once inside, he pressed two fingers to the family photo taped to the cockpit, and then, shortly after that, boosted into the darkness and silence of space.

\* \* \*

><p>Lichs were still circling the area when Willis's squadrons made it out. In front of him but off to the right was the big Promethean ship, looking a little worse for wear than when he'd seen it last, but still fully functional. There was a lot of dark gray space debris beside it.<p>

"Well, I see what the problem the SpecOps team encountered is now," Major Hawk said over the COM. "Their exfil craft was blown to bits."

"Yes," Collins answered. "But from what I've read, that's the least of it."

"You said they'd found something in there. Do we know what?"

"If they know, they haven't relayed the info to me yet. I'll pass word along as soon as I hear."

"Got it."

"Talon?"

"Yeah?"

"Watch your sectors. I have a feeling this might get dicey here shortly."

"Understood."

Hawk pushed lightly on his Broadsword's controls, moving at a steady, cautious pace towards the enemy ship. The Lichs were still far enough away to not be an issue, but they would be soon. Willis wondered what their purpose was in working with the Prometheans. As far as he was aware, they were enemies, too. He wondered why they weren't firing on each other.

\_ 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend', \_ he thought to himself. \_I

guess that's true now. Humanity's on its own against both these guys.\_

Willis soon found himself ahead of the pack without meaning to. There was a lone Broadsword at his flank, and he wasn't at all surprised when he saw the callsign.

"Snoopy," he said aloud through the radio. "Already tailing me?"

The response was immediate. "I told you, Talon. I got your six, come hell or high water."

"As long as you don't make my ass a target again," Hawk grumbled.

"It won't happen. You have my word, sir."

"I'll believe it when I see it." He checked his boards. "Any contacts yet?"

"None in range. I'll fry the first alien bastard to try."

"Good. I don't know about water, but I'm sure we'll be seeing hell today."

It was like a cue. A single lance of plasma shot out at them from up ahead then, too far away to hit, but definitely bright enough to notice. Heat laughed over the shared channel.

"Get a load of this guy," he said. "Stupid fucker doesn't even know he's out of range. I thought they only made smart Elites."

Willis wasn't convinced, however, and his jaw tightened. "He knows. Keep an eye on him. He might be taunting us."

"Taunting us? Has he seen the size of those MAC guns on the platforms?"

"Can it, Snoopy, and check your screen."

"Yes, sir."

For some inexplicable reason, Willis felt a little like a centuries-old cowboy in a duel. The fastest one would live; the one who hesitated or miscalculated would meet his end. What are you trying to tell us?

A second and third shot pushed out into space. They still weren't close enough to do any damage.

"Maybe he fell asleep on the trigger?" Captain Heat quipped.

"Not likely." Hawk opened a channel to Collins again. "Flight Leader, you seeing this?"

"Yes, Talon. I'm not sure what - "

That's when it happened. The boards on Hawk's console lit up, and his pulse increased with them.



"Energy spike!" he called out, the panic oddly focusing him. "It's coming from the ship!"

"What the - "

Major Collins didn't get to finish. As soon as the energy spike appeared so did the beam, shooting out strong and fast at the Earth's surface. It all occurred so quickly no one had a chance to make any moves - or sounds. It was almost over in a flash.

Alarms were blaring inside the cockpit when the beam disappeared. Hawk worked frantically for a few moments shutting them down, then returned his attention to the COM. "What the hell was that?"

There was nothing but static.

"Flight Leader? Snoopy, do you copy?"

He jabbed at a few more controls. Finally the line came through.

" - witnessed a high-density pulse of light! It made contact with the surface!"

"Contact?" Willis asked, trying to remain calm while hoping against hope it wasn't somewhere his family was. "Made contact where?"

"New Phoenix, Talon! New Phoenix is gone!"

New Phoenix? What?

It didn't make sense. The Prometheans coming through the portal on the ground were on the East Coast. What could this ship possibly want with New Phoenix?

"Holy shit," Willis heard, and he focused again on the radio transmissions. It was Heat. "Talon..."

"What?"

Heat's voice took on a rare somber tone. "They're saying...they're saying the whole population's gone. Everyone, Willis. Every single last one of them. The city...it's destroyed."

The enormity of the thought was overwhelming. One beam shot from the Mantle's Approach was all it had taken to eliminate one of North America's largest population centers. The implications hit home hard.

If they start coordinating with the Prometheans on the ground, Hawk thought with dread, Charleston might be next.

His immediate impulse was to contact Cooper - he had to talk to her, let her know of the danger. But there was no way for him to do it. And even if he could, what then? There was still nothing Natalie could do about all this from the surface. He felt frustrated and stuck.

As if reading his mind, Collins said over the COM, "Talon, don't worry. They'll let the ground teams know."

"Roger," the other major answered quietly.

"Our job here is to make sure that beam doesn't get another chance to fire," she continued, strangely calm. "87th, let's form up and get ready."

#### 41. Chapter 40: Hard Life

Author's Note: Hey all, I'm back. I'm not sure what's going on with the formatting in the story, since the right parts are bold on my end, but it doesn't seem to be appearing on the published page. Hopefully this'll get fixed soon.

Anyway, hope you enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Forty: Hard Life<span>\*\*

\*\*0520 Hours, September 21, 2558. Near the City of Charleston, South Carolina, United States. "The Grind," Planet Earth. Day Sixty-Four of the War of Tomorrow\*\*

Facing an alien invasion was never easy, and I was finding now that even having done this before, there were still some things that managed to throw me for a loop. Each time was different, with a new set of circumstances and - sometimes - a new enemy, too. The Storm we'd all dealt with on our home planet before as the Covenant. The Prometheans, however, were something else entirely. And that's what ultimately awaited us...if we ever got out of this damn crater I'd gotten us pinned down in.

"Colonel, I'm not sure how much longer we'll be safe here," Staff Sergeant Derek Lynch said beside me, holding his SAW tightly against his shoulder as he lay prone in the dirt, occasionally firing off quick bursts at the ex-Covies who took an undue interest in our position. "I realize we're pretty stuck until that Wraith's out of the way, but with the rest of the unit moving forward, we're going to get overwhelmed by infantry soon."

I was well aware of that fact myself, but so far, the opportunity to get moving again hadn't presented itself. The staff sergeant, Ethan, and I had spent the last several minutes just holding out here in the giant blast hole, hoping the rear elements would do something about the enemy tank targeting us so we could evacuate, but it didn't look like things were going to be that easy.

"Nothing ever is," I muttered to myself, and instead of responding to Lynch's comment, I squeezed the trigger of my battle rifle at yet another group of Remnant troops aiming for us. Then I glanced back at Ethan. "Care to help?"

"Of course, Colonel," he said, coming up on my other side. Like me, he positioned his BR over the crater's edge and focused in on the same group. "But you know, we're not going to be able to take out the whole army by picking them off from here."

"I know. We were supposed to get support from Overwatch but I guess that's not coming in. And we'll run out of 'Hogs around here

soon."

The only other option was to move back out into the open, but that was far more deadly than taking our chances here. Although both would eventually lead to our death.

Finally getting frustrated, I rose up to a crouch with my rifle in hand and said, "Well, if we're going to die today, I don't want to do it lying in wait. Let's - "

I stopped mid-sentence as we watched a rocket streak across the terrain then, followed quickly by two more. That was one extra than what was normally in a tube, so that meant there were at least two Marines firing heavy weapons. And their aim was dead-on. There was a brilliant explosion up ahead, right where the Wraith tank had been positioned. Bright blue sparks and metal parts flew into the air, and I knew our final big baddie had been eliminated.

I paused just long enough to grin beneath my helmet and shouted, "Tank's gone. Move out!"

We all crept out of the hole with caution, weapons raised. The Wraith was gone, which made maneuvering easier, but both Ethan and Lynch were right - the leftover Storm that survived the aerial bombardment posed a great threat on their own, and we were still without a ride. I keyed my COM while keeping my eyes peeled for trouble.

"Overwatch, this is 52nd Actual. Wraith just got wiped by a heavy weapons team. We still need pickup."

"On it's way, Actual. Sit tight."

The response had me frowning, but at least it'd been quick. I thought of the two rockets again and wondered if those Marines knew just how important their shots were. They likely weren't aware of it, but they'd just done me a solid - I'd make sure to find out who they were when this was all over and put them in for commendations.

"So what's our next move?" Ethan asked.

"Same as before," I answered. "Stay alive until the cavalry arrives." I motioned up ahead. "Come on. We're not safe out here and the crater's dialed in, so we need to find some better cover."

We tried to move low so as not to be seen as silhouettes on the horizon, but the sun was starting to come up now, slowing beginning to light up the battlefield. With the enemy tank gone, that was going to be another potential way to get spotted - and dead - fast.

More of the surrounding Storm troops must have seen us despite the precaution, though, because plasma rounds began hitting near us in short order.

"Drop!" I shouted, throwing myself onto the ground and bringing up my BR fast. Lying here prone was a risk, but it made us smaller targets and gave us a steadier shot at the enemy to take them down.

Once my aide was in the dirt he opened up with his SAW, blazing through a line of curious Grunts who'd gotten too close for comfort. I aimed down the sights at one of the Elites behind them in the

meantime, tagging one in the head with three consecutive bursts, killing it. Ethan lit up the Jackals, but there were more on approach than just the ones we'd managed to get.

There'd always be more than the three of us could handle on our own.

"Ma'am, closest cover is going to be that next crater up ahead," Staff Sergeant Lynch said. "Looks like the ex-Covies are pressing forward, though. We'll probably have company as soon as we get there."

"Shit." I'd been hoping that moving out of our initial cover would help. Instead we'd gotten out only to head for another one that wasn't looking any more promising than before. I was at a loss as to how we could pull out of this cut off from friendlies and alone in what was soon going to be broad daylight. I silently cursed our Overwatch team that didn't seem to be doing their jobs very well. Without our supplies, which had been blown away in our 'Hog, we'd be out of ammunition in a hurry, too...if we even survived that long. I released a sigh. "I guess we have no choice. We take our chances there or get wiped out in the open."

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than another explosion resounded in front of us. I instinctually covered my helmet with my hands as the earth shook beneath us yet again, then saw the tattered remains of the Remnant's forward lines lying dead in new patches of blackened blood. I turned back just to get a look at what the hell had done all that. That's when my grin reappeared.

"It's about damn time!" I yelled over the general COM freq. "What took you so long?"

"Got into some trouble, Colonel, but we made it through! Apologies for keeping you waiting, but I hope our entrance makes up for it."

"Better late than never, huh?"

"Yes, ma'am. Hop in."

With Lynch watching our six, Ethan and I loaded up in the back of gauss cannon Warthog that'd been called out for us by Overwatch what felt like hours ago. All in all though, the driver was right - I couldn't be too mad, because they'd just saved our hide.

"I heard you're expected elsewhere, Colonel," the driver, an older master sergeant, said. "I think with that baby back there, we can get you there in one piece."

I snorted. "That's probably what Lynch thought, too. The Storm have a way of very violently beating that notion out of your head."

The master sergeant laughed, although I felt Ethan tense up beside me at my choice of words. \_Good,\_ I thought. \_He should feel ashamed about what he did.\_ I turned to look at him as we all huddled in the back once Lynch got in with his SAW, but my ex didn't meet my gaze this time. That was fine with me. I cradled my gun in my lap and took the moment to reload, then kept the barrel up and ready for hitting more aliens as we rode.

The 'Hog was moving again, and the cannon gunner with us launched a second projectile at the Storm. Another cluster of the enemy was blown away.

"As much as I enjoy seeing them bouncing around instead of us," I said to him, "save some rounds in case we hit more vehicles, Private. Could be a long road to where we're going."

"Where's that, ma'am? Um, if I may ask."

"Out in the direction of Walterboro. Your master sergeant knows where."

"Yes, ma'am."

The senior noncom had received the coordinates from me when I got in, and now had the objective marker on his HUD as well. I keyed the COM now that it was relatively quiet - at least more so than it had been - and checked to make sure Delaney was still en route.

"What's the word, Major?"

"We're nearing the site now, ma'am. I'll let you know what we find once we're there."

"Roger that." I nudged the staff sergeant, pretty easy to do since we were all crammed uncomfortably in the back. "Derek? What's the status on the rest of the security team?"

"They're on their way as well, Colonel. No mishaps."

I nodded. "About time we get some good news." \_I just hope that Cal's right, and that's where the portal is,\_ I thought. \_Otherwise, we don't have much else in the way of leads, and this'll only get worse.\_

Ethan bumped into me then, tapping a finger against his helmet. He wanted me to reenter our private channel. Grudgingly, I did.

"What now?" I asked.

"You're not going to like this, Nat. But I just got a message from Command. Sounds like that SpecOps mission with the Promethean ship out in space went belly up."

"\_Fuck.\_" Just when I thought things were finally getting back on track down here, of course shit would hit the fan upstairs. "Willis?"

My ex released a heavy sigh. "I assume his air wing was called in to help, yes. I wasn't finished yet."

"Okay. So what - "

"Obviously this is classified information, but apparently the ship has a massive weapon on board. Command says it leveled an entire city with one shot."

My blood instantly ran cold - I almost didn't even feel all the bumps

in the road from the Warthog, or hear the occasional spray of fire from the Marine riding shotgun. I suddenly had the inexplicable - and probably unwarranted - feeling that the city was somewhere near my kids. "Where?" was all I could get out.

"That's the strange part," Ethan answered thoughtfully. "It wasn't anywhere around here. It was out in Arizona. New Phoenix."

I relaxed immediately, although I felt bad about it the moment I did. Just because it'd hit far away the first time didn't mean it would again the second - if it was allowed to fire again. And even if it didn't, there'd still been a whole enormous city full of people destroyed.

I couldn't wrap my head around it. "How...how bad was the damage? And why there?"

"From what I heard in the report, I meant exactly what I said. Leveled. Not a soul left alive, not one building standing. It just...literally got wiped off the map."

"Jesus."

Ethan nodded, but his voice was still unaffected. "We don't know why it was there yet. But if that's what the Prometheans' weapon can do with one round, we could be in big trouble if they manage to coordinate with their forces down here and launch another one."

"We might be next," I said unnecessarily. I closed my eyes tight for a moment and took in a breath, slowly letting it out. If I'd thought this day was going to get any better, that was just about the rudest awakening any of us could have received.

Please try to stay safe up there, Will, I thought to myself. And do what you can to make sure the Prometheans have no chance to get that weapon going a second time. \_

## 42. Chapter 41: Colossus

**\*\*Chapter Forty-One: Colossus\*\***

**\*\*0546 Hours, September 21, 2558. In Orbit, near Mantle's Approach. "The Waste," Planet Earth. Day Sixty-Four of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

"Coming in hot! Watch your vectors!"

Willis saw the scene unfolding outside the cockpit windows rather than his screens as one of the lead Broadwords was blown to bits on the opening salvo. They were just now approaching the front side of the large Promethean ship, Mantle's Approach, and apparently, the Remnant's Lichs were well within firing range now.

"Eyes on your boards, people!" he cried in light of the explosion. "Don't let them get the jump on you! Stay alert!"

Taking his own advice, Willis shifted his gaze and wasn't surprised to see his screens glowing red. Ever since the enemy ship had loosed that beam shot that had left New Phoenix utterly devoid of people,

Lich activity outside had increased. And now, rather than just taunting them, the crafts were actively on the attack.

"Talon, bogie on your one o'clock!" Captain Brandon Heat shouted.

"I see it!" Hawk returned. The major reacted fast, pushing up deftly on his controls and then going into a sharp roll, just barely avoiding the plasma fire from the ex-Covies' troop ships. The Lich flew past him from below, making a loop to turn back around and fire again, but Willis was faster. He flipped his Broadsword end for end and faced the enemy fighter dead-on, blasting away with his auto-cannons, bringing it down before it even had a chance at a counterattack.

The encounter left a spike of adrenaline rushing through his veins, and he heard Heat let out a whoop from their shared channel.

"Damn, Talon! Nice flying, buddy!"

Willis bristled at the easy friendliness in the captain's tone, but said nothing. The maneuver had been exhilarating, but there were plenty more Lichs were that came from, and they still had a potentially catastrophic situation on their hands with the Promethean ship.

"Just focus on what's left, Heat," he said over the COM. "Plenty more to shake our guns at."

"Yup. I bet if we just fired randomly we'd hit some of 'em anyway," Brandon replied. "Did you notice how many more showed up after the beam hit?"

"Yeah," Hawk answered. "The sky's definitely full. Something's up."

The pair took to the fight together naturally, without either being conscious of their fluid motions in concert as they watched each other's six. After over a decade of training and dogfighting as wingmates, not even the recent fallout with Hawk's crash threw them out of sync - at least in terms of their flying.

"New bogie trio coming up, Gold Leader," Heat warned him. "Looks like they're trying to get the two on the flanks behind us."

"They'll regret it. Let's peel off."

"Got it."

Both Broadswords turned away from each other then, breaking formation to go after the Lichs on either side of the main one, coming in on their twelve. Hawk took the one on the left, strafing it with his auto-cannons, but the alien pilot was good and managed to bob and weave out of the way. Willis licked his lips and gripped his controls tighter. \_Two can play that game, \_he thought.\_ Let's see you fancy-fly your way out of this, tough guy.\_

"Launching missiles!" Major Hawk announced. "Three, two, one...fire!"

The projectiles streaked through the darkness of space in eerie

silence, hitting their mark in a muted blast that, astonishingly, didn't cause the Lich to detonate. It was badly damaged and leaking atmosphere, but the pilot was somehow able to get it turned around and facing Hawk. Rather than fire its own weaponry, as Willis expected, it boosted right for him - a last ditch, suicide effort at a kill.

"Oh, shit!"

Frantically, the major tried shifting his position, but the craft was so close there was no time. He targeted the Lich with his auto-cannons again, but at that speed, the inertia would take the damaged ship towards him nonetheless - even if it was only debris at that point. There was no escaping this.

Major Hawk shut his eyes tight, waiting for impact...but there was none. When he opened them again, there was only obliterated pieces of the craft left, and none were large enough to cause his F-41 significant damage. He swallowed hard, realizing how close to death he'd just come.

\_Sorry, Cooper,\_ he thought on a slow exhale. \_I owe it to you and the kids to be more careful, but that ship...\_

"You're welcome!" Captain Heat yelled into the radio. "Now we've still got one more to go! Let's get at it!"

Though he still wondered what had actually occurred, Hawk boosted after his partner. "Right behind you, Snoopy!"

The central Lich was flying erratically now, presumably trying to keep from becoming a target of either of their missile systems. It was a good plan...except for the fact that its two wingmates were dead now, and it had no support. Instead of Brandon and Willis being triple-teamed, it was the alien's turn to get a taste of its own medicine in return.

Watching on his boards, as well as outside the cockpit, Willis saw Major Collins's craft come streaking into view from the right. Their CO swooped in with auto-cannons burning up the star-speckled, blue-black sky - and this time, not even the Lich's dizzying twists and turns could keep up with the barrage of fire. It exploded right in front of Heat as he was on approach to help, and for a terrifying second, Hawk thought he'd been caught up in the blast.

"Snoopy! Are you - !"

Jovial laughter greeted him over the COM. "I'm good, Talon. I'm good. Though it's nice to see you still care, sir."

Willis grit his teeth even as he felt the relief wash over him. Of course the captain would pull out of the fire. He always did. The bastard. "Glad to hear it," he responded tersely.

"And thanks for the help there, Flight Leader!" Heat continued, addressing Collins this time. "Great timing, ma'am! You just saved our collective tush."

Hawk imagined their CO had a smirk on her face when she replied. "All right, all right. We'll have the celebratory barbecue and



beer-drinking party later, okay? Right now we need to make sure that Special Forces team gets the safe exit they need...and we need to get that beam out of commission."

"Yes, ma'am. We're on your six."

"Gold Leader?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Let's lead the squadrons to the starboard side of the ship. Command wants us in position to escort the exfil craft in and out this time. No fuck-ups now."

"On it, Flight Leader." Willis switched channels and keyed the COM. "87th, this is Gold Leader. Form up on me and Flight. We're headed for that Promethean ship. Watch for the exfil craft and make sure nothing happens to it. Gold out."

"And now we wait," Heat said calmly over the radio.

It's a little more complicated than that, Hawk thought to himself. With dozens of Lichs still circling around Mantle's Approach, this was going to be one of the hottest pick-ups in their air wing's history. But at least the SpecOps team could rest assured knowing they had some of the UNSC's best pilots at their back.

\* \* \*

><p>"Okay! Taxi service is here! Where's the troops?" Heat asked.<p>

There wasn't a whole lot of time to keep an eye on the exfiltration when there were smaller enemy craft to deal with, but Willis had noticed it, too. The stealth Pelican that had shown up to pick up the SpecOps team was all but idling by the Promethean ship's hangar bay on the radar. Major Hawk found this curious.

"Flight Leader, this is Talon. Exfil doesn't look like they're evacuating yet. What's going on?"

A slight pause, then, "Talon, we're going to need to keep an eye on things out here for a little longer. Apparently there's a situation inside - "

Collins's voice was suddenly drowned out by alarms blaring throughout the cockpit again. Willis knew what that meant, and his blood went cold.

"Shit! Second energy spike! They're charging up the beam again!"

The only way to describe what Major Hawk felt in the moment was white-hot panic. There was nothing - absolutely nothing - he could do about this, nothing he or his fellow pilots could do to stop it. If Mantle's Approach had Charleston in its sights...everyone in the city would soon be dead. Including Cooper and Matt.

He felt his chest tighten with dread. He wanted to signal her somehow, to scream at her what was coming, but there was no way. He had no choice but to watch another city - and his wife and brother -

get obliterated by the devastating enemy weapon.

\_No,\_ he thought. \_No, no, no, no, no...\_

He blinked and the alarms abruptly stopped. He continued holding his breath, entirely unsure what had just happened.

"Flight Leader - "

"Wait one, Talon. Receiving an update."

Hawk spent the agonizingly long seconds staring hard at the family picture taped to his cockpit. He couldn't begin to make sense of the tragedy if Natalie and her regiment had just been -

"The beam was stopped," Major Collins said then over the channel. She let out the words incredulously on a breath. "That's what the Special Forces team was delaying for. They knew the Prometheans were about to fire again, and they got them to stop."

"But how?" Willis asked, still in disbelief himself at the news.

He heard his CO swallow hard, a first for her. "They're going to sacrifice themselves. There isn't going to be an exfil for them."

The major frowned. "What? How?"

"They staged a last-minute assault to stop the beam from firing this time," she explained. "But the Prometheans will just try again. Unless they do something to prevent them permanently." She swallowed again. "And now they have to. There's no other choice. They were going to blast the ground teams in Charleston and Savannah."

Willis felt lightheaded at the revelation. Natalie would never even know how close to death she and her unit had all come. \_Christ.\_ He found his voice again and said, "What's the plan?"

"Receiving orders from Command now...\_holy shit\_. They've got a HAVOK onboard. They're nuking the ship! Everyone, fall back!"

Major Hawk figured they wouldn't nuke \_Mantle's Approach\_ until they could get a safe distance away, but just the thought of a detonation on that massive a scale - and his CO's urgent tone - was enough to get him boosting away quick.

"We need to get back to LP Alpha!" Collins continued, shouting her orders. "That's as far as we'll get in time, and their shield is the only thing that'll protect us! Move!"

There was no time for more words or discussion. The entire 87th Air Wing sprung into action alongside him, heading at a fast pace towards the listening post near Luna. Once enveloped in its shield, they could survive the blast...but it'd be close. The SpecOps team would wait, but not forever.

"I'm posting a countdown to everyone's screens," Major Collins said, strangely calm now. "Be sure you're in that bubble in time."

Willis and Heat were among the first to make it within LP Alpha's

safety zone. Hawk waited just inside the bubble for his squadrons to arrive, ticking off names on his roster to ensure everyone had made it. Major Collins had been just behind them, but she continued to wait outside the safety area, unwilling to save herself until every last one of her pilots had made it.

In the meantime, Hawk continued to watch his screens. Only twenty seconds were left. And judging by the air wing roster, two squadrons still remained outside. \_Oh, no,\_ he thought. \_I hope they can make it.\_

The seconds seemed to go by faster than normal, as worry for his fellow pilots and CO grew. \*\*18 secs\*\*, his screen read. \*\*16 secs. 15. 14. 13. 12.\*\*

"Come on!" Willis finally cried into the general channel. "You can still haul ass in here! Boost it!"

\*\*11. 10. 9. 8.\*\*

"Flight Leader!"

To his surprise, she responded immediately, although in a low voice. Resigned. "They won't make it, Hawk. Or me. Be good to the rest. I know you can do it."

"\_Collins, no!\_"

\*\*3. 2. 1.\*\*

"Holy fu - !"

A giant white light lit up the Promethean ship then, making it glow for the briefest of milliseconds - so short it wasn't even able to be seen as a transition by the human eye. Then, in a flash, it was gone. \_Mantle's Approach\_ had been destroyed.

And with it, two whole squadrons of pilots, the Special Forces team on board, the stealth Pelican beneath it...and Major Erin Collins.

It took Willis a moment to let the realization sink in as he sat inside his cockpit, fighting a cold sweat and breathing heavy.

In one fell swoop, he'd suddenly become commander of the 87th Air Wing.

### 43. Chapter 42: Rising Tide

\*\*Chapter Forty-Two: Rising Tide\*\*

\*\*0613 Hours, September 21, 2558. Near the City of Charleston, South Carolina, United States. "The Harrowing Road," Planet Earth. Day Sixty-Four of the War of Tomorrow\*\*

"Colonel Cooper, I just heard some news I think you should know about. Maybe one of your spooks has already imparted this -"

"Sir, if it's about New Phoenix, I've been made aware." I rubbed my

eyes, feeling my exhaustion more completely now that we weren't running around trying not to die - as well as the aches and pains from my old needler wound after being thrown from our first 'Hog. "Commander Ackerson received the report and let me know. Do we have anything we can use against the Promethean weapon?"

Brigadier General Bolowsky sighed over the private channel. "Unfortunately, no. Not from the ground. We're going to have to rely purely on our counterparts upstairs for this."

I nodded to myself, mumuring, "I was afraid you were going to say that."

"You mentioned your husband was involved in the fighting there. Is everything all right?"

Right now I was trying my best not to think about it, so I wasn't distracted by my worry. "Fine for now, sir. I haven't gotten any updates yet, good or bad."

"Let's hope it stays that way. We've got an important job to do down here, and he's got his."

"Yes, sir."

"What about the portal? Any progress on that?"

"We're on approach now. I think you probably heard from Overwatch, but things were a little hairy for us for a while so we got delayed."

"Is anyone else from your unit there?"

"Major Delaney, sir. He hasn't called anything in."

There was a pause, then, "Very well. Keep at it, Cooper. And be sure to keep me updated on the situation - and what you find."

"Will do, sir."

The connection cut and I was freed to focus on what lay ahead. Looking at the mini-map at the bottom of my HUD, I could see we were nearly on top of the coordinates Lieutenant Lloyd had given me. I let out a sigh. \_Well, it's either here or it's not, \_I thought.\_ Here goes.\_

Ethan shifted beside me to get a look at our twelve o'clock. Next to him, Lynch sat ready with his SAW. All of us were on edge, and I gripped my BR tighter in response as well. I was expecting a hard fight from the Prometheans - or maybe even the Storm.

Instead, there was nothing.

"Doesn't look like there's much activity, Colonel," the master sergeant said. "No sign of the major yet, either."

Something felt off. I keyed my COM to hail the 904th's commander again. "Delaney, it's Cooper. What's your location?"

"At the site, ma'am. You need to get here and take a look at

this."

"My HUD says we are here, Major."

He sounded slightly embarrassed. "Oh, yeah. Sorry. The spook's coordinates were a little off, but we managed to find it. Sending you new ones now, Colonel."

I waited for my map to update, then checked the route. We were still a few clicks away. Lloyd's location had only been an estimate to begin with, so this was good work. "Got it. We'll be there in three mikes."

"Roger."

After letting the master sergeant know of the new location, we were off once more. I settled back into the cramped rear but didn't fully relax. We weren't there yet, but we would be soon.

"And here we are, all keyed up for nothing," my ex spat through our private channel, glowering beneath his helmet. "The major should have sent you revised coordinates the moment he arrived."

"It was an honest mistake, Ethan. No harm, no foul. Let it go."

"'Let it go'?" he repeated. "This is a war zone, Natalie. Misinformation can kill you."

I chuckled darkly. "And tell me, as one who works in Intelligence, when our information has ever been entirely accurate."

"We do our best, Cooper."

"Exactly. Just like Delaney did."

"Whatever," Ethan retorted. "I just thought you'd expect more from your officers."

At that I bristled. "I've said this before, Ethan. Do not presume to tell me how to do my - "

I felt the Warthog swerve then as the master sergeant shouted, "Contacts! Doyle, open up!"

The sounds of gunfire erupted from the passenger seat as the Marine riding shotgun did just that. To my left, Lynch did the same, the loud rattling of his SAW quickly drowning out the repeated pattern of Doyle's MA5D. The rear-mounted cannon remained silent for now, awaiting further orders. It seemed my talk with the private about conserving ammo had worked.

In the meantime, stuck in between us, Ethan couldn't seem to find a clear line of shot to fire. But I did. Looking through my battle rifle's scope as I leaned over the side, I saw the mass of Promethean fighters in my trigger hairs and let loose a quick flurry of bursts. I happened to catch a Crawler out of pure luck as it ran past; it erupted into a pile of sparking metal. My next target was a Knight, and I was able to hit it with a burst before its drones covered it with a shield. I cursed and rapidly aimed up, but by then we'd

already sped past - and into a new group of enemies.

"Fire that cannon now, Private!" I called out as the Warthog jerked to the right a second time, throwing me abruptly against Ethan.  
"Fire!"

Using one hand with my gun in the other, I pulled myself back up against the side of the vehicle and brought my BR to bear, acquiring a new target with ease and letting loose. The private wasted little time reacting to my orders, launching a new round immediately into the crowd, tossing Crawlers into the air and Watchers to the ground. Some of the faster Knights teleported out of the way. A few didn't and ended up scrap alongside their fellow AI-bots.

Amidst the chaos, I opened a new channel to Delaney. "Major, I think we've hit the right area this time! Give me your battalion's position! I don't want any friendly fire, and this way we can coordinate!"

Thankfully the response was instant. "I'll have my XO throw up smoke, Colonel! Watch for it!"

"Acknowledged!"

We kept firing as we awaited the signal - and then, ahead and to the left, I spotted it. A thick plume of bright orange smoke was steadily rising and expanding from the ground. \_Bingo,\_ I thought.

"Message received, Major!" I said into the radio. "Watch your fire! We're headed your way."

"Understood, ma'am!"

Leaning to the left, I tapped the cannon gunner's boots. "Private, watch for that smoke. Do \_not\_ fire in that direction. They're friendly. Anything else moves, let 'em have it!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

I knew getting to Major Delaney's position, though close, would be tricky given the volume of Prometheans surrounding us. \_Adapt and survive,\_ I thought grimly to myself. There was going to be a long fight ahead - and we hadn't even reached the portal yet.

\* \* \*

><p>I was breathing heavy and had had my fill of hair-raising circumstances by the time our 'Hog finally came to a stop inside the 904th Battalion's lines. This had been the safest position I'd been in in the last two hours - and we were surrounded by the enemy.<p>

With all the excitement going on, I'd somehow transcended my exhaustion now and was suddenly feeling more alert than ever, no doubt thanks to the adrenaline spiking through my system. It was going to be a hard fall when I came down from it, but for now it kept me going, and I was grateful for that. There was still a lot of work to be done.

"All right," I said to no one in particular as we stepped off. "I

need to regroup and find a place to get some new orders sent out. Major?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Is there anywhere around here you've observed that I can use as a CP? Doesn't need to be glamorous, just functional."

He paused, then said, "There's a small dirt road on the edge of the perimeter, ma'am. It's cut off by some trees and should provide good cover. I'll get one of my captains to send a platoon out there to help secure it."

"Excellent. Let me know when they're ready. Cooper out."

I cut the connection and checked the load on my rifle once more, ejecting the spent magazine and slapping home a new one. It was the last one I'd had on hand. \_Always down to the wire,\_ I thought. \_I'm surprised we get lucky so often. So many others don't. \_Now that I was regrouped with Delaney, my team and I had the 904th's supplies to feed off of. I figured it should be enough for the time being.

After the gauss gunner, Ethan, and I left the back, Staff Sergeant Lynch was the last to jump out as the gunner mounted up again. I walked up to the driver's side and thumped on the vehicle.

"We've all dismounted," I said to the noncom. "Thanks for the lift, Master Sergeant. Be careful out there."

"You, too, ma'am. Semper fi."

"Oorah."

With a dirty spin of the tires they were off again, heading back into the fight. For me, it was time to get a sitrep from the remainder of my regiment, and then push forward towards the probable portal's location. I'd just slung my battle rifle behind my back when Delaney's voice flooded my helmet.

"Colonel, CP's clear. I'll have Lieutenant Evans escort you there now."

\* \* \*

><p>It didn't take long to turn the designated area into a working command post. Ultimately, it wasn't anything more than a quieter spot to observe the ongoing battle and think - nothing hi-tech, but it was enough.<p>

With my datapad laid out before me on a large rock, displaying a real-time, two-dimensional view of the 52nd Regiment and nearby enemy forces, I called in my other battalion commanders one by one.

"Major Harris, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. Report."

There was lengthy pause, then static filled the line before the major's voice did. "Colonel, we're...inned down right now. Getting into the city...as been hell. We've be...stalled at every turn."

\_Damn,\_ I thought. That was not good news. "Acknowledged. Has Brewer been more successful?"

"-o, ma'am. We're through the Storm's...ines, but the Prometheans are...at the city gates in force. We're...equesting air support."

"Okay. I just spoke to Overwatch a while ago, Shawn, and they said we've still got some time to wait for the jets to rearm and refuel. Keep me posted, and try to hang in there. Shouldn't be too much longer now."

"Don't...orry. We'll hold 'em off, Colonel."

"Good. Cooper out."

I hailed my XO next, as her battalion was the spearhead of the assault. "Brewer, it's Cooper. Tell me what's happening out there."

"We're doing all we can, ma'am," the major answered. I was glad to hear the line was clearer on her end. "Our Marines are fighting a hard fight, and we've got Scorpion tanks and 'Hogs trying to work some of the tougher clusters of 'bots. They're pretty concentrated out here though, Colonel. We've yet to make it into Charleston, but we're trying."

"Understood. I just talked to Harris and he recommended calling in some additional air strikes. I concur."

"I've requested the same, ma'am. Looks like the Broadswords still aren't ready to drop more payloads yet. Overwatch said they'd let me know the moment they're up."

"ETA?"

"Sixteen mikes, Colonel. It'll be close, but we'll keep knocking on the door till then."

"All right. Keep me appraised."

"Of course, ma'am."

"Cooper out."

With the call finished, I straightened up and put my hands on my hips, absently watching the tiny figures move along my device's screen. Everyone was working hard, but the going had been slow thus far. I wasn't sure what more we could be doing - what more \_I\_ could do. I finally risked pulling off my helmet for a moment and ran a hand over my put-up hair, releasing a long sigh. Bolowsky would want a sitrep soon as well, and I hated having to tell him our progress thus far had been limited.

"You're overanalyzing things again," I heard a familiar voice say behind me. "Things aren't really as bad as you're thinking."

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Ethan approaching. I snorted, yet somehow felt eased by his presence.



This despite the fact that only a short while ago, we'd been arguing with each other. Again.

"Sure seems like it," I said.

"Remember, Cooper, you can only control what you can control. After that, you just have to be patient while what you've put into place plays itself out."

"More winning advice from your dad?" I asked mildly.

"Nope." Ethan came around to my left then, standing beside me with his hands crossed over his chest. "Something I've learned from being a spook, actually. A lot of our work is painstaking planning, and then careful - \_agonizing, mind-numbing\_ - waiting to see how it all ends up."

I chuckled, genuinely amused this time. "I think you've just described most of the military right there."

"Maybe, but I'd say it's a problem felt particularly acutely by those of our stature."

We exchanged a look then that was meant to be a glance but lingered, until I finally looked away. I folded my hands across my chest, too, widening my stance.

"So you really think there's nothing else I should do now?" I asked, gesturing at the busy image on my datapad.

"Nothing more than what you've already got on your plate, which is significant."

I stood there frowning for a minute longer, then finally shook my head. "I can't. I can't just stand here and wait it out while my men do all the work. We need to get back into the fight, too, and start trying to push into where the portal's supposed to be. We're so close."

I'd just pulled my helmet back on and slung my weapon off my back when I received an urgent hail from General Bolowsky.

"Colonel Cooper, I've just gotten more news from upstairs."

My heart instantly skipped a beat. "Sir?"

"The Navy decided the Promethean ship was too much of a risk, given its weapon onboard. \_Mantle's Approach\_ was nuked as of a few minutes ago."

"Shit," I breathed. Then my mind caught up with itself, and the terrifying implications hit me straight in the gut.

\_Willis.\_

I had to force my next words out. "What about the nearby friendlies, sir? Ships and pilots? The Special Forces team aboard? Did they...?"

Bolowsky took in a breath. "I won't mince words, Colonel. Some made

it out in time, and some did not. Now, before you - "

Even in the middle of his speech, I started to check out as mounting panic enveloped me.

" - was not among those lost. Cooper? Did you hear me?"

"I...what was that, sir?"

"Major Hawk has been confirmed alive, although not all of his air wing managed to escape unscathed. Command is still getting ahold of exact numbers."

I released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. Willis was safe. \_But so many of his fellow pilots didn't make it,\_ I thought. \_Christ.\_ I was relieved and devastated for him all at once.

"This was a costly win for us, Colonel. We don't have to worry about another city being destroyed from orbit, and most of the fighting up there now amounts to mop up duty, but many UNSC lives were lost when that nuke went off."

I nodded to myself, still in the midst of recovering from my personal crisis. "I understand, General. Anything you want me to do?"

"Our priorities haven't changed. We still need that portal gone and we need to get the Prometheans out of Charleston, at all costs. The only difference now is that we don't have a massively destructive weapon aimed at our heads."

"That's a big thing to be grateful for in all this."

"Yes. Our fellow service members didn't die in vain."

"No, they didn't," I responded quietly. "Thank you for the update, sir. Especially...for letting me know about my husband."

"Of course, Cooper. I didn't want something like that hanging over your head." He sighed. "Let's continue on fresh from here. There's still lots to do on our end."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm expecting an update from you in thirty. Bolowsky out."

After the connection cut I had to take a time out and be by myself for a moment. I crouched down in a ball and pressed my hands on either side of my helmet, closing my eyes and really taking it in. Tens of Marines and sailors - maybe hundreds - were dead. And my husband had nearly been one of them.

A shuddering breath went through me, but that's as far as I let it go. I soon stood up again and ran a hand over my face. Once again, the few had died to save the many. Like the general had said, it was ultimately a victory for us, though the price paid had been high.

And when the price was nearly your loved one, was the sacrifice still worth it?

"Natalie?" Ethan asked, slowly coming towards me. "What happened?"

I waved him away. "I can't, Ethan. I just...I can't right now. You'll get the message from Command."

And with that I resumed my post.

#### 44. Chapter 43: An Alternate Route

##### **\*\*Chapter Forty-Three: An Alternate Route\*\***

I couldn't say things were going smoothly quite yet, but it seemed activity had picked up in the last twenty minutes. Just a moment ago I'd received a radio update from Major Brewer, who indicated that our air support was finally up and running again. Soon we'd have a squadron of F-41's flying overhead to drop more heavy payloads just outside the city limits.

As for me, it was time to jump back into gear. I opened up a COM channel to the 904th's commander.

"Delaney, it's Cooper. What's the status on the fight?"

"Up in the air, Colonel," the major responded. "We're holding them off for now, but there's a lot of Prometheans out here."

I glanced down at my boots, aware that we couldn't afford to get stalled on our mission for so long. The top priority remained finding - and eliminating - that portal site. It was time to forge ahead on our own. "Acknowledged. I'm going to take my security detail and Lieutenant Evans's platoon and push forward, see if we can't at least confirm the portal's location. As long as you're keeping the AI-bots busy, that's all we need."

"Yes, ma'am. We'll make sure they don't come your way."

Once the connection cut I was already walking several feet away, where Ethan stood staring at his datapad, likely checking his messages. I gestured at him to get his attention and he looked up.

"Come on," I said. "We're moving out."

"To where?"

"To the portal - or where we think it is."

Ethan frowned. "Is that wise to do by ourselves?"

I let out a sigh. "I don't really have a choice at this point. If we keep sitting around here twiddling our thumbs and waiting for the path to clear up, more and more 'bots'll just keep popping out. That group the major's fighting is continually replenishing their numbers, and we're not. Eventually we'll be outnumbered. We have to deal with this now."

"All right." He shifted his stance. "You have a point, Cooper. So what are we doing?"

"We'll go ahead with Evans's platoon for now. Get to the area, see what's there, and blow the place to kingdom come if that's where they're coming from." I gripped my weapon tighter against my chest. "I'd rather not have the portal rigged this time, so now that they're available, I'm thinking of calling in an air strike to deal with this."

My ex nodded slowly. "Sounds like a plan."

For some reason a grim smile formed on my face. "We'll just have to make it out before the Broadwords swoop in, obviously."

"I figured that was a given. We're right behind you, ma'am."

\* \* \*

><p>Searching for the portal behind enemy lines and with minimal backup hadn't been my first choice in how to deal with this invasion. But sometimes things just went the way they went, and you had to go with what you had. First Lieutenant Adalbert Evans was young but experienced, and he made a great point leader for the team.<p>

"Ma'am, I hear some movement up ahead," he whispered over the COM. "I respectfully suggest you let us check it out first."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant. I'll be waiting."

"Yes, ma'am."

I crouched down as Staff Sergeant Lynch and the security detail circled around me, watching the platoon's progress. I tensed up when I heard gunfire erupt, but it didn't sound like too many Marines were engaged; not noisy enough. It was nearly over before it began.

"Talk to me, Evans," I said into my mike.

"Stragglers or guards, ma'am. There were two Knights patrolling with a handful of Crawlers. No drones."

"That's odd."

"Yes, ma'am. With your permission, I'd like to move further ahead and see where they went."

"Wait one."

Rising from my crouch, I gestured to Staff Sergeant Lynch, who got my security detail on their feet.

"We're heading in with you," I said to the lieutenant. "Staff, watch our approach."

"On it."

With Lynch taking point we moved into position, going carefully through Lieutenant Evans's platoon until we'd made it near the front. From there, I got a good look at the Promethean debris - the doggie bots', anyway. The Knights' scraps of metal were already gone.

There was nothing else to assess from here. We had to keep going. I gave a subtle gesture to the lieutenant and we were off again.

\* \* \*

><p>"This is it, Colonel," Lynch announced beside me. "It has to be. Look at those markings."<p>

We'd just come up on an object that no one would have noticed was out of place from afar, but seemed suspect up close. Breaking with the war-torn area around the outskirts of the city, it looked to be a concrete box of sorts covering the ground - until you walked onto it. I reached out and touched the outer layer of material, knowing instantly in my gut that this wasn't anything of human origin.

There were slight grooves and swirls in it. This had to mark the portal. But how were the Prometheans getting out?

"Looks small to accommodate a whole invasion force," I said. "It's only slightly bigger than a manhole to the sewers in a large city."

"But the Knights can teleport," Ethan countered, stepping up beside me to inspect the object. He tapped the side of his helmet, producing a light, and swept over the cover, probably recording it on his cam. "And we know they're pretty fond of hiding their entrances underground."

I hefted my rifle in my hands. "Only one way to find out. Evans, let's get this thing open."

"Yes, ma'am."

In a few minutes members of the lieutenant's platoon had rigged the cover. Stepping out of range, we waited for it to blow open, then began our descent.

\* \* \*

><p>The chill was normally always what hit me first, but this time it was the smell - or lack thereof. I'd expected an unassuming grate of alien origin that hadn't been opened in God knew how long would reek of...something. This place had no odor at all. There was no light, either, so we had to turn on our night vision optics to see.<p>

We were going down a set of narrow stairs in the dark. It wasn't exactly the best tactical situation I'd ever been in, but for now there was no other way.

In the quiet, Ethan reopened the private channel between us. "Still thinking of bombing this place from above?"

I frowned as we walked, stepping carefully down each stair. "Doesn't look like that's possible now, huh?"

"Probably not. Why are you so against rigging the interior?"

"Because it went very badly last time," I answered, irritated. "I thought that'd be obvious."

My ex let out a sigh. "Natalie, those Marines who died on Khan knew what they were doing, and how things could end up. Don't let that stop you from making the most sensible choice in how to deal with \_this\_ here and now. Sometimes...these things just have to be done."

I turned on him then, stopping on the step I was on and jabbing a finger at his chest in the dark. "You mean like the nuke they just detonated upstairs that very nearly killed Willis? An explosion like that? Fuck the consequences and who might \_die\_ in it?"

Ethan didn't even flinch. "Yes, Cooper. Exactly like that. People are going to get killed in war. You know this. You can't be afraid of making the right call because of that."

"I accept casualties in war, Ethan," I said hotly. "What I don't accept is \_me\_ doing it to \_our\_ people, even if it's collateral."

"The few for the many, Natalie. It's simple math. There's times when you have to do something bad to do the best good."

"Yeah? And what if that's just a load of bullshit to make ourselves feel better about betraying those we fight alongside?"

It took me an extra second to realize I was shaking in anger and hurt. This wasn't the time or place to have this conversation. I clammed up and continued forward.

Not surprisingly after my experiences with these places on Khan, the stairs soon opened up into a larger chamber underground. Finally, the lights came on and we could see better.

"Shut down your NVs," I ordered over the general channel. "Let's sweep the room and see what we can find. Use extreme caution. We know if the portal's here it's still active, so enemies can pop out any second."

For a moment I wished Lieutenant Lloyd were down here with us instead of Ethan. I could work a lot easier with him without getting my heart rate up over Ethan's coldly calculating assessment of things. I had no doubt he'd experienced loss due to orders before, but he seemed to take it all in casually, as an expectation. I'd lost both of my best friends, my parents, my older sister, and even my baby because of that type of thinking - and I couldn't, for the life of me, ever believe that that was just the way things were meant to be. There had to be a better way. If it existed, I'd find it.

"Colonel, you have to see this. Take a look."

I turned in Ethan's direction and stepped forward, squinting. "What is it?"

"This is a portal all right," he said, pointing to the familiar etchings on the walls in the back. "But if I'm analyzing this right...it hasn't been active for years."

"Then how - ?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. We'd have to get the scientists in here to know for sure, and we don't have the time or security to do that. But this is definitely not where the Prometheans are coming from."

The realization hit me hard. I'd thought for sure we'd arrived at the right place, that the invasion's days were numbered now that the portal would soon be gone. Instead we'd been saved from getting obliterated from orbit, but hadn't resolved the issue of a whole robotic army entering the planet on its surface. It was huge blow.

"Shit," I muttered. "Just...shit."

"What do you want us to do?"

"Rig it," I commanded. "I don't want this left here for the future, even if it's inactive. You never know." I met his gaze. "But we all leave the chamber together. No one gets left behind with the explosives."

"Colonel, I wouldn't - "

"That's an order, Ethan," I said firmly, and then walked away to help.

\* \* \*

><p>We were back outside shortly. It was then that I finally got why getting here had been so easy, and the Prometheans' presence so sparse. Of course they wouldn't leave the real portal unattended. But it was a small comfort knowing we were about to get rid of another one.<p>

"Standby," Lieutenant Evans said over the COM channel. "Demo team's ready to hit it. Everyone clear?"

I waited, crouched behind cover like the others, as I watched the acknowledgment lights wink green across my HUD.

"All accounted for, Colonel. We're detonating in three, two, one..."

The chamber was so far underground that the explosion up top was muted this time. What looked like the concrete slab but wasn't jumped as dark smoke billowed out, but that was it. The inactive portal was gone.

"All right," I said. "Good work, Evans. Let's get back to the CP and we'll restart our search."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get the platoon moving."

I felt more than a little demoralized during the walk but tried not to let it show in front of the men. We'd had one good lead, but of course it had turned out to be too good - too simple - to be true.

Ethan seemed to sense my mood despite my best efforts and came up beside me once more. This time I felt him close, and he put a hand on

my shoulder and squeezed. "We'll find it," he said, and somehow that small action comforted me.

"Thanks," I replied after a moment. "I know we will. It just sucks having to go back to square one."

#### 45. Chapter 44: Hollow

**\*\*Chapter Forty-Four: Hollow\*\***

**\*\*0647 Hours, September 21, 2558. In Orbit, near Luna. "The Title," Planet Earth. Day Sixty-Four of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

There was no time to let it sink in - neither the fact that Major Collins and two squadrons were dead, nor that Willis was now in charge of the remainder of the air wing in her absence. Now that the Promethean ship was gone, all that was left were the Remnant Lichs swirling through space.

Hawk knew they needed to be eliminated for Earth to be safe, so that's what the pilots did, even in their state of saddened shock. Most went about the work automatically, because they understood it had to be done, but others still kept to the routine of waiting for the official orders to come through. That's where the major and his new role came in, but somehow, it felt wrong.

He wasn't the 87th's true commander. Collins was.

"Talon?" Captain Heat asked quietly over the COM channel. "You okay, man?"

This time the familiarity didn't bother Willis. After the tragic loss of so many of the people he fought alongside every day - and nearly facing his own death, too - it just felt petty to antagonize his former best friend.

"Not really," he answered honestly. "I know we needed that ship's beam shut down, but...damn."

"At least Cooper and your brother are safe, right?"

Hawk released a sigh. "Yeah. That's just about the only bright spot in all this."

"So...is this a bad time to remind you you're in charge now? Of everyone?"

"Yup. Real bad fucking time, buddy."

Willis heard the faint smile in Heat's voice. "Hey. You called me 'buddy'. Look at you going all soft."

"Watch it, Snoopy. I'm your CO now."

"Been 'sir' to me for a long time, Talon. This doesn't change a thing."

Despite himself, Hawk began to like the feeling of knowing Heat would always have his back. He said he'd do as much in battle, but Willis



knew, after years of friendship, that he did in life as well. Taking on the heavy burden of becoming the commander of the 87th Air Wing was daunting, but slightly less so with a good friend by his side.

Maybe Brandon was right. Maybe he was finally softening up.

"What are your next orders, sir?" the captain asked.

Instead of answering his buddy, Willis opened up a general channel, addressing his words to the entire air wing for the first time since the detonation. "87th, this is Talon, your former XO and new leader. I know all of you are still reeling over what's happened. I am, too, but we have to push forward. We've lost a lot of good friends today, fellow pilots and our true CO, who decided to lay down her life alongside us rather than be spared, when so many were sure to not make it.

"I know it hurts and you're grieving, but all of that has to be put aside now. Our job continues, and the Prometheans and Storm - both here and on the surface - won't wait for us to feel better to resume the attack. Now is the time to mount a counterassault, when they think we're weakened and their biggest, baddest weapon has been destroyed.

"With Mantle's Approach out of the way, we can do this. Let's get out there and make sure we secure Earth's space. Gold Leader -  
"

Major Hawk paused then, on the verge of tearing up. He felt the lump in his throat but swallowed it, and instead said, firmly, "Flight Leader, out."

## 46. Chapter 45: Bringing the Past to Light

**\*\*Chapter Forty-Five: Bringing the Past to Light\*\***

**\*\*0702 Hours, September 21, 2558. Near the City of Charleston, South Carolina, United States. "The Perilous Slope," Planet Earth. Day Sixty-Four of the War of Tomorrow\*\***

I really wanted a drink.

And it wasn't just something that would be nice to have anymore, either. My mouth felt dry no matter how much water I drank, and I could feel a sharp headache beginning to form that wasn't only from being tired and emotionally beaten. I wanted booze, but more than that, my body seemed to crave it, and I was already sweating despite the fact that the sun was barely over the horizon.

To stave off the discomfort, I pulled my canteen from my belt and took another swig of water, trying to snap myself out of it. It was a long way from here to a bar and there was still lots of work to accomplish. This would have to do for now.

We'd reached the area where I'd set up my CP earlier. I pulled off my helmet for a moment, ran my hand over my face, and prepared myself for the conversation ahead with General Bolowsky. Then I replaced the bucket on my head and hailed him.

He was quick to respond. "Colonel? Is that portal gone?"

"Negative, sir," I said, successfully keeping the disappointment from my tone. "We found a portal and destroyed it just in case, but this one wasn't active. We'll have to keep searching."

"Damn. I really thought this was it."

"Me, too, sir."

"All right. Make sure your team stays on it, Cooper. Don't let the bad news ruin their morale."

"No, sir. I'll keep the men focused."

"Good." He paused then. "I'm afraid I have an unpleasant update on my end as well. It's about New Phoenix."

"Sir?"

The general took in a breath. "We've finally gotten eyes on in the city. Everything is, surprisingly, still intact. It's just...empty and barren. It's the people who are gone, Cooper. Not the buildings and structures."

For a second I didn't even know what to make of that. Slowly, I said, "Sir, I don't know about you, but I almost feel like that's worse."

"It is, Colonel. Very unsettling. I'm glad our Navy boys and girls upstairs were able to get rid of that ship. I can only imagine the havoc that weapon would have wreaked on the planet."

"Don't have to imagine it, sir. Looks like we have a good example in Arizona."

"Too true. Stay sharp out there."

"Of course."

"Bolowsky out."

After the connection cut I felt like I'd have a permanent frown on my face. The news just kept getting worse. I couldn't imagine how terrifying it would be to see an entire city, perfectly fine and unaltered on the outside, but with its entire population inside just...missing. It made me think of the nuke again, and it's necessity. Maybe Ethan was right. When you couldn't possibly save everyone, getting rid of a super destructive weapon at the cost of a relative few to save millions of others perhaps was the good choice. Just as it had been on Khan.

Before I sent out new orders, I took my helmet off again and sat down on it on the ground, lost in thought. I needed to center myself somehow in the face of all this madness. Because I knew there'd be no breaks from here on out.

"Colonel? Can I make a suggestion?"

I glanced up to see Ethan on approach, also helmetless. I gave him a shrug in reply.

"Come with me. You look like you could use a little chat, and I don't think you want this to be in front of everyone else."

"All right." I rose carefully, hefting my rifle behind my back and gripping my helmet in one hand. "Where to?"

"Just a bit further ahead. Not too far. I wouldn't want to put us in danger." He gestured to the team around me. "Lose the detail."

I nodded in agreement. As I stepped past, I nudged my aide's shoulder and said, "Give us a minute, Staff. We'll be right back."

"Yes, ma'am."

We were alone in short order. I stood there for a moment, seeing if Ethan had something to say to me, but he didn't. It really looked like he was just here for me, so that I could let out whatever I was feeling and move on. So I finally crossed my arms over my chest and released a sigh.

"Five years ago I was stationed in Ecuador, towards the end of the War," I said, purposely keeping my tone even. "We'd all heard from command that there were many Covenant in the surrounding area, but I didn't know at the time just how much they might've known about that."

My ex frowned, not following. "Okay."

"I couldn't understand why we weren't just going after them," I continued. "We knew they were out there, and I knew there were ops underway to find out how many there were and where. I didn't get it until later." I took in a deep breath. "We were finally forced out when the Covenant attacked our base en masse, overrunning it."

Ethan said nothing, letting me go on.

I gave him a nervous glance, wondering how much I should say. But I eventually decided I needed to say it for him to understand. So I did. "I was three months pregnant at the time and wasn't supposed to get involved in the fighting, but there was really no way out for me. I wasn't able to get evaced in time. My company did what they could to protect me, but as you know, that's not always possible in the field. I...Willis and I...we lost the baby."

"Jesus."

I nodded, but kept my voice level. "I found out afterward that our higher-ups had known all along the Covenant were there. Their numbers as well as their intentions. But they did nothing to stop it, Ethan. Not a damn thing. Because they wanted the enemy to lead us to why they were there in the first place. So they waited. And that waiting...it cost many hundreds of lives on the base that day. And indirectly, it cost my baby's life, too."

When my ex kept silent, I added quietly, "So you see now, with that and many other things I've been through, why I don't take making decisions like that lightly. I know exactly what kinds of

consequences they bring, even if the gamble is usually deemed to be 'worth it'. That's not always the case, and you could be needlessly throwing a lot of lives away."

"I understand," Ethan replied. "But you also know that choices like the one you made on Khan - and the nuke - have to be made."

"Yes." I shook my head. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm sorry for getting so upset. All I could think about in the aftermath was Willis, and how he could have died, and I wasn't thinking about the bigger picture. I know now. The general told me the news about New Phoenix."

"I heard, too. That's some fucked up shit."

"Yeah. The kind of shit I'm very glad we stopped."

There was a moment when it felt like something shifted between us. We both went silent and just stared at one another. Ethan stepped up closer then, cupped my cheek in his hand, and before I even realized what was happening, his lips were on mine.

I pulled back immediately and slapped him, still stunned. "Ethan, what the hell!"

Oddly, he seemed just as surprised as me as he held onto his burning cheek. He said nothing for a moment.

"Fuck," he finally spat out. "Natalie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean -"

I took another two steps back, holding up my hands. "No. This - this isn't going to work. I can't work with you after this."

"\_Natalie\_ - "

"No! I can't believe you'd do this!" Then I snorted at my own words, smiling in self-deprecation. "Or maybe I do. Maybe you haven't really changed and I'm just incredibly fucking stupid. So thanks, for showing me the way."

"Cooper, stop," he said gently, motioning towards me, but I gave him an icy look to keep him in his place.

"I'm going back to the CP now, Ethan. You'd better not be right behind me."

## 47. Chapter 46: Sharp Turn

Author's Note: That was great timing. Login started working just as I finished up the chapter. :)

Enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><span><strong>Chapter Forty-Six: Sharp Turn<strong>

\*\*1234 Hours, October 13, 2558. City of Charleston, South Carolina,

United States. "The Renewed Hope," Planet Earth. Day Eighty-Six of the War of Tomorrow\*\*

Three weeks later we'd made it far into the city. The fighting in Charleston was going strong, but we still hadn't found the original Promethean portal yet.

As for me, I'd been inside Charleston's city limits with Majors Brewer and Harris's battalions since the day Ethan had kissed me in the outskirts. I'd left him there with Delaney's 904th to figure out the rest and moved on myself, as working with Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd instead posed no risk, and I was not going to encourage my ex's behavior by staying. I was still able to keep an eye on things on the outside, albeit from afar and only via COM. But that suited me just fine. The more space between Ethan and I, the better.

"Ma'am, it's Brewer," my XO said through my helmet then. "We've just secured this sector of the city. Standing by to move on to our final objective."

"Acknowledged," I replied, and cut the connection. Pausing at an ammo crate to grab a few extra mags for my rifle, I quickly stuffed them into my web belt's pouches and cargo pockets before picking up two frag grenades, too. I clipped those to my chest armor and turned to face Staff Sergeant Lynch. "What's going on? Is Harris ready?"

"I believe so, ma'am. I'll let him know we're green."

I nodded. "Do it."

While my aide got a hold of my former battalion XO, I walked up to one of the Scorpion tanks rearming by the motor pool. Carefully, I slung my BR behind my back and climbed up onto the large tracks, pounding on the hatch to get the driver's attention. She poked her head out shortly.

"Colonel?"

"We're just about ready to storm downtown, Captain," I said. "Make sure our armor is prepped to go."

"Will do, ma'am. Our weapons specialists say we should be completely armed in five minutes."

"Great. We roll in six."

"Understood."

Brewer and Harris's battalions had managed to get inside the city once the Broadwords had swooped in the day we'd started the ground assault, as the birds had further softened up the Prometheans's lines at the proverbial gates. Since then, I had them work on clearing out the enemy forces in the city sector by sector. General Bolowsky and I had broken Charleston down into five distinct grids, and my Marines and I had been fighting hard in each one to push the AI-bots back. In three weeks, thanks in part to strategic air strikes and plenty of armor and 'Hogs, we'd gotten through four sectors so far, which was excellent. All that remained was the heart of downtown, where I expected the most resistance â€" denoted by the brass as Sector Echo.

Today, we were poised to take it.

Before the final events were set in motion, however, I hailed the brigadier general one last time. "Sir, it's Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. We're just about ready to go now."

"That's good to hear," he answered over the COM. "The other sectors have been taken care of?"

"Yes, sir. Echo's all that's left now. We drove out and eliminated all enemies in Sectors Alpha through Delta." I paused. "We took some heavy casualties at Bravo, but we've managed to move forward with what we had."

"I see. Any update on the civilians?"

It was then that I glanced down at my boots, dirty and scuffed and a little bloody from weeks of skirmishes and battles. "There were a lot of dead, sir."

I closed my eyes momentarily and remembered the grisly scenes. They'd been in houses, apartments, streets, and offices â€" either gutted or shot or blown up to death. Just normal people going about their normal lives before all the shit had hit. It made me think of my kids in Pensacola, and how this easily could have happened to them while Willis and I had been gone, had the portal been there instead of here. I swallowed hard. "We did what we could to rescue the ones that were left. Given the large scale of the assault, there were many still alive. We've set up several staging camps for them in each of the sectors where they can get some food, water, shelter, and medical attention."

"Very well. Do we know the final numbers on the lost?"

I shook my head, then realized he couldn't see the gesture. "No, sir. We won't know until we hit Echo, which I'd guess to be very full when this all started. It's been a few weeks, though, so I'm not expecting miracles."

"Right. Any numbers on the refugees?"

"About ninety thousand in each sector, sir. Less in Bravo and Alpha, more in Delta. Charlie made out best with close to a hundred-fifty-kay, sir."

"That's something, at least." I heard the general sigh on the other end. "But considering the city once held almost one million, it's not a pretty win to be looking at."

"No, sir," I said quietly. "We did our best."

"I know. I just hope things are better down in Georgia. I just got word today from Command that we'll be going there next."

I blew out a breath. In many ways I'd known this was coming, but after several weeks of fighting and many lives lost â€" both civilian and military â€" I knew the troops would be tired. Knowing that it didn't end here would be a blow to morale, which already wasn't very high to begin with. We'd seen an awful lot in such a short time.

"Yes, sir," was all I answered.

"That just means we need Echo secured soon, Colonel. I know you'll get the job done. Bolowsky out."

When the call was over, I just stood there a moment, a humorless smile on my face.

"No pressure, huh?" I muttered softly to myself.

\* \* \*

><p>The few minutes I had before the assault were up soon, and now everyone was on the move. I had my former XO leading the charge with my former battalion, the 8th Engineers, giving Brewer and her infantry battalion a reprieve from spearheading the operation. Though I wanted to be with my old unit for a number of reasons, I knew that tactically I shouldn't, so I stuck by with the 213th instead, waiting for the signal that we were good to go.<p>

In the meantime, more of our motor pool started to edge out, with Warthogs leaving first, then the Scorpion tanks, one by one. We were going to have four MTBs with the battalion going into the city; Major Harris had six. We were sparing no expense to save Charleston â€" and hopefully, there were still people left alive at its core to evacuate.

Against what many would've wanted â€" mainly Bolowsky and my detail â€" I was going to set off on foot this time, going every step of the way with my men. When I looked up ahead, I saw just the Marine I'd been looking for.

I gave him a small grin as I approached and thumped the back of his torso armor. "Hey, kiddo. Long time no see."

A dirty and rattled-looking Matthew Hawk turned to face me, offering a slight smile of his own. "Holy shit. Nat. It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, what?"

"Ma'am. Sorry. It's good to see you, ma'am."

Happy to see him safe, I reached out with my arm and put it across his shoulders, pulling him close for a quick side hug. "I'm glad you're staying sharp out here, Matt. How've you been holding up?"

He shrugged. "Probably the same as everyone else. Just making it through the shit." He glanced at me then. "How's my brother?"

"Still in orbit, last I heard. Although I haven't been updated in a while."

"Worried?"

"Of course. But I try not to think about it."

He nodded, then swallowed. "It was hard out on Khan, doing this stuff, and then on Requiem. But being here, on Earthâ€"it just feels worse. All these people â€" "

I nodded solemnly. "Yeah. I know exactly what you mean. But we're here to help them, Matt. And we're going to stop the Prometheans now, today."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ready to go do that?"

Matthew got a look of fierce determination in his eyes, hugging his MA5D tighter. "Hell yeah."

"All right, good, 'cause Major Harris just gave us the green light. Let's move."

\* \* \*

><p>I'd already spent weeks seeing the devastation inside Charleston, even after giving the UNSC an advance warning of the AI-bots' imminent attack from Requiem. A lot of the city had been in ruins with rubble and burning fires everywhere " and many, many dead. In contrast, the whole downtown area looked very much intact for the moment. It was a promising start.<p>

Which was why if we could spare them, I wanted the buildings left standing, at the least. I keyed my COM to Major Harris.

"Shawn, it's Cooper. How's your view of the front?"

"The real estate looks good so far, ma'am, but we've already come across some bodies," he responded. "And Prometheans. They've got a whole big hideout here. I think that's why most of the buildings were spared."

\_Shit.\_ "Anyone of ours still left alive?"

"We've found a few pockets of survivors here and there, ma'am. We'll have to move further into the district to really see."

"Got it. Keep moving forward, then."

"Of course, Colonel."

"And use your armor and heavy weapons with caution. Unless the 'bots are holed up in there, and you know for sure, let's try to keep what's left of the city upright."

"Understood."

It wasn't long before we were engulfed in the fighting, too. A few more large city blocks up, we were suddenly stopped by a large Promethean force that definitely didn't want any more humans getting through.

Everything was chaos in a moment. Prometheans were fighting large swaths of Marines, and the sounds of battle were overwhelming. My helmet was working overtime to dampen the sounds, and that was the only way I was able to hear myself think amidst the firestorm.



"Let's go, Marines! Fan out, squad by squad! You know what to do! Take down those 'bots and protect any survivors you find!"

Following my own orders I swept right, keeping my security detail with Matt as we went in with his unit. We were hoofing it across the street now to better cover, sticking behind the tanks and jeeps to keep from getting seen - although I'd had my own reservations about that as well. Doing so on the Tsavo Highway during the War had cost me my best friend - and nearly my own life - when the tank we'd been trailing had exploded. Luckily, this time that didn't happen.

"Stay down! They're coming this way!"

Multiple heavy rounds of light \_thunked\_ against a blown-out bus we were using as cover, now that we'd separated from the tanks. The Crawlers and Watchers showed up on our position first, getting welcomed by a veritable wall of lead from my Marines. Soon the scrap metal was piling up in a smoking, sparking heap. I grinned inside my helmet and maneuvered carefully around my detail to join the fight myself.

"Great work! Keep at it!"

That's when the Knights showed up.

The first to teleport in did so in style, disappearing from several yards away and reappearing in front of us in an instant, its orange light blade already stuck several inches deep in one of the young Marine's guts. The woman coughed out blood and grunted when the Knight pulled the blade out, anxious to get another one of us. Matthew â€" definitely beginning to be one for heroics, I could see â€" brought his gun up at the same time I did and unleashed a hellish barrage of fire from his AR. I made my own shots quick and precise, aiming at the Knight's head with my scope even close up, and the AI-bot was down in seconds. Not before the wounded Marine at point breathed her last, though.

Surprising me, my young brother-in-law rushed to her side.

"Anna!"

Frantically he compressed her gaping wound with his hands, not realizing â€" or maybe not wanting to acknowledge â€" that his squadmate was already dead. Holding a hand tightly against the blood flow, he used his other to check her pulse, growing frustrated and upset when there was none.

"Come on! Fuck!"

I came up behind him slowly and gripped his shoulder. "Matt, I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do for her. She's gone."

He looked up at me, wild-eyed. "Call Doc!"

"I can't do that, Private. You know why."

The medics were working hard enough with the wounded civilians and other Marines to have them waste time with the dead â€" or positively dying. If there was no way to save them, it was just the way it had

to be. Doc Reynolds had triaged enough patients when we'd taken our first sector that I knew exactly how this would turn out.

When Matthew looked back at me, there were unshed tears in his eyes. "Goddammit. It's not fair."

I swallowed hard, remembering all the friends and family I'd lost over the years. I understood better than most what he was feeling, but there was no time for that here. "I know. But we have to keep going. We have a lot of people in the area that still need saving."

"Natalieâ€|"

"You \_don't\_ call me that in the field in front of others, understand?" I said, my tone intentionally harsh to get him going again. "Now \_move\_."

That seemed to do the trick. Seeing me as a superior officer and not as a familiar member of the family got him up and resolute, jaw set with his deep brown eyes â€" so different from his older brother's hazel â€" brooding. He didn't say a word, but seemed ready to follow my lead when I gestured to the squad to move up.

A loud, shattering explosion rocked the street as we were making our way to the other side of the block. Fragmented glass rained down on the asphalt, and chunks of debris were loosed into the air. I immediately frowned and keyed the COM.

"This is Colonel Cooper. Who the hell fired that shot?"

"One of mine, ma'am," Harris's voice came through the radio. "I've got visual confirmation that's where the 'bots are at."

"No survivors?"

"Not in this building, Colonel. Alpha Company already swept the area, top to bottom. It's all those robot motherfuckers parked in there."

I grit my teeth and nodded. "Give 'em hell."

"Yes, ma'am."

By the time we'd made it to the other side, taking refuge behind concrete traffic barricades, one of the Scorpion tanks had moved in, helping the rocket teams with disintegrating the hell out of the Promethean hideout. I heard the tank commander's steady voice flood my helmet on the general channel â€" the female captain I'd spoke to earlier.

"MTB-Two, get ready. Fire main cannon, now!"

"Firing!" the lieutenant on the other end replied.

I heard the sound of the outgoing shell blast out of the tank before crashing between the building's first two floors. We were all gratified to see tens of Prometheans get bull's-eyed in the detonation, but one clear look inside the rooms showed hundreds more. \_Looks like we found the hornet's nest,\_ I thought grimly.

Opening a channel to my two battalion commanders, I called out, "Harris, keep up the forward assault! You're doing a fantastic job so far!"

"Thank you, ma'am. We'll keep on it!"

"Brewer, since we're bringing up the rear, I want you to get one of your companies started on doing a more diligent search for any civilians that might still be alive. I want downtown cleared by nightfall, if we can manage it."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Downtown was a smaller area than the other districts of the city had been, but densely packed. With its dozens of compact, high-rise buildings â€" encompassing both apartments and businesses â€" the population here easily soared past four hundred thousand. It was far more than the other sectors we'd covered so far. And although it'd taken the longest to get here thanks to the geography, I didn't think it was too far-fetched to hope for many thousands of people still living.

After helping a bit by the large Promethean-occupied building, I figured I'd let the more than capable Harris do the rest, and rerouted the squad I was with to follow my XO's company on their mission to help evacuate civilians. Right now the only staging area we had available for them was going to be in Delta sector, and it was going to take many rides by 'Hog to get whoever we found there. Air support was going to be our best bet, but until the city was a little more contained in terms of the enemy, I wasn't going to call pilots in to help just yet. That, I'd do later, once things were secure.

As we raced through the streets, stopping more frequently than I would have liked to deal with another group of the 'bots, I noticed Matt was keeping his face a stone mask, devoid of emotion. I wondered briefly if Anna might have been more than a friend â€" maybe a young girl he'd taken a liking to â€" but it wasn't my business. She'd been a private as well and now she was dead. There was no need to worry about the rest.

"Matt, stay focused," I said to him, dropping instantly down on one knee to fire off several short bursts at a group of Prometheans we'd spotted as we'd rounded the corner. I aimed for the drones first, allowing Staff Sergeant Lynch â€" on my left â€" to reduce the Crawlers to sheet metal with his SAW. We had the upper hand until one of the Knights threw out a light grenade, and all of our electronics suddenly went dark.

Two of the young Marines beside me, also squadmates of Matt's, put hands to their heads as essentially, their whole world blacked out. I'd had more experience with the EMP pulses and rolled with it, but they didn't, and were quickly shot by a Crawler. Their bodies fell to the ground quickly in an unceremonious heap.

"Shit!"

My well-meaning but impulsive brother-in-law lunged out, but I tackled him to the street before he jumped out of cover and became one of the dead.

"What are you doing? Stay the fuck down!" I shouted, hyped up on adrenaline and a little exasperated by his continued attempts at getting himself killed. "I'd take a bullet for you, kid, but getting shot once out of your stupidity was enough for me. If you don't care enough about yourself that's a problem, but please at least try to be cautious for me. And your brother. And your nephews and niece. All right?"

Matthew glared at me as I let him up. "I'm just trying to help!"

"You'll do no one any good in a body bag, trust me. Be patient."

My helmet's systems finally came back online then, and by the time we got back into position to fire at the Knights, they were closer â€" nearly on top of us now. I brought my rifle up to shoot but heard the familiar â€" and always anxiety-inducing â€" \_click click\_ of the mag. It was empty.

Frustrated, I rapidly slung my BR behind my back and pulled my sidearm out of its holster, firing point-blank at the Knight until that clip was empty, too. Just as I thought I'd meet the same fate as Anna as it produced its knife, a loud burst from behind me startled me. I dove for the ground as the shots fired just above my head, taking out the Knight and nearly me with it. When it was over I stood, looking back to see the proud shooter. It was Matt.

"Now we're even," he said.

\* \* \*

><p>Once we hooked back up with the rest of Brewer's designated company, four long hours went by in which we painstakingly went over buildings â€" room by room, floor by floor â€" searching for survivors while the main battle raged on outside. We still found Prometheans around, and plenty, although I'd been surprised â€" and relieved â€" to see many more humans who'd managed to escape death.<p>

We were running down a stairwell when we heard cries for help.

"Get to the next floor, now! Hurry!" I yelled.

As we scrambled down the steps, leaping down two or three at a time, boots pounding the pavement as the weight of our gear crunched our knees, I made it down first, finding the entrance to the next level blocked. In one swift motion I pulled my leg back and kicked open the door with a heavy boot, then brought my battle rifle to bear once more, ready for trouble. What I saw instead nearly broke my heart.

Two small girls of about six and eight lay bleeding on the ground just outside one of the apartments. Their mother lay in a pool of blood herself, already clearly dead, while the father grasped frantically at his two children's heads. They'd been shot.

"Help me!" he screamed, half shouting, half sobbing. "Please, \_please\_, help!"

"Corpsman up, \_now\_!" I cried, stepping closer but never bringing my gun down, just in case. At the same time, I was trying hard not to let the scene overwhelm me. Just as I'd had for most of my time in the city, when I'd encountered many such instances just like this. To the distraught father, I said, "Are there any more 'bots on this level?"

He quietly shook his head, never turning his face from his girls.

In case he wasn't mentally with it, which would be understandable, I gestured back to two squads to start canvassing the floor. In the meantime, Matt's squad stayed with me, and my security detail formed a tight perimeter around us and the injured civilians.

"We're getting a medic to take a look at your daughters now, sir. Can you tell us what happened?"

He looked up and it was as if he was seeing me for the first time. He frowned, eyes still wide in shock. "Who are you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Colonel Cooper, sir. UNSC Marines. We're here to rescue you."

The man nodded but said nothing until the medic arrived. I was glad to see it was Doc Reynolds who answered the hail. The girls would have a much better shot at living.

"Step aside, sir, if you would," Reynolds said. "I'll need some room to treat them."

As Michael got to work, I stood by, still waiting to see if I could get what had occurred out of the civvie. I was about to ask him again when the two squads I'd sent out to clear the other rooms returned.

"All clear, ma'am," the sergeant said loudly, then lowered his voice so the civilian wouldn't overhear. "There's some signs that the Prometheans came through here earlier, Colonel â€" a couple of bodies and some metal parts, black spots on the walls and floors. Looks like people tried to fight them off with whatever they had â€" their own firearms, pots, pans, their house robots, you name it. But they're long gone now."

I nodded, still trying my best to remain as emotionally detached as I could. I couldn't imagine what the people here had gone through. "Any more survivors?"

"I found a couple of teenagers hiding in a closet with their cat. Their grandparents were massacred at the door. No sign of the parents."

I nodded again, wearily this time. "All right. Get them safely downstairs for now while Doc tries to treat these girls. I'll get a few 'Hogs ready for the building. They'll take them to Delta."

"Yes, ma'am."

Glancing back at the girls as Reynolds worked to patch them up, I released a discreet sigh and thought again of the tremendous toll in lives the Prometheans had taken. On this floor alone, only five

people had survived the invasion â€" maybe less if one or both girls didn't make it. We'd been luckier on the other levels so far, but thisâ€¦things like this were always hard to take.

I didn't have time to dwell on the tragedy, however. In order to give the survivors the best chance at life, I opened a general COM channel to call for evac. "All 'Hogs, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. I need three troop carriers at this location if you're available. We've got some civvies to transport, some critical. Out."

Acknowledgment lights winked green on my HUD. They were on their way.

As soon as that was done I returned my attention to Reynolds and the kids. He looked to be finished bandaging up the youngest girl, most critical, and was working on the sister, inserting biofoam into her wound before producing a roll of gauze for her, too. Beside them, their father was desperate to know the outcome.

"Doc? Doc? Are they going to make it? Are my girls going to be okay?" Then he let out another half sob. "Oh God. Their mother's dead, please don't tell me they're â€" "

Calmly, Reynolds stood once he was finished, giving both girls some strong painkillers and light sedatives for now. I saw him return the meds to his pouch before facing their dad.

True to his nature, he placed a hand on the man's shoulder, comforting. "I've done all I can for now, sir. We'll get them evacuated out of here, and you, and we'll bring you all to a safe place. That's all I can do."

The father looked panic-stricken. "But â€" "

"It might take some time, sir, but they should recover. They're stabilized for now, so you can rest easy."

The civvie's face lit up. "Oh, thank you. Thank you." He looked back at me, too. "Thank you, Colonel. For coming to help. You heard us. Thank you so much."

I gave him a brief nod. "You're very welcome, sir. I'm glad things went well."

"They were shot in the head," he nearly sobbed. "I thought â€" "

"They'll be all right now," Reynolds reiterated. The medic glanced at me with a small smile, basking in the success and the sole bright spot of this very hellish day. Make that weeks. I smiled back.

Just in time to frown again as I received a hail, this time from one of the units on the outside. It was Ethan.

"Ma'am, it's Commander Ackerson," he said formally, indicating he was likely in front of others. "We've found that portal."

Relief washed through me, so much so that I had to take a step back from the others and grip my rifle tighter. "You're sure this

time?"

"Yes, ma'am. Fully functional, Prometheans crawling out of it, the works." Ethan paused. "We took some time to beat the enemy back, but we've got 'em now. All that's left is your orders."

"My orders?"

"Yes, ma'am. How would you like this party dealt with?"

I thought again of my options â€" I could either have them rig the place to blow, which was most likely to conclude the way we wanted it to, or I could take our chances with an air strike. One that may or may not utterly destroy the place. I released a sigh. "What's the tactical situation over there, Commander?" After what had happened between us the last time, I wasn't about to revert back to being informal with him.

"We've got the explosives packed and ready to go, Colonel. Demo team is already inside, but waiting on you. It's your call, Cooper."

I took in a deep breath. Having the portal \_maybe\_ destroyed was not something I was willing to bargain with, given all I'd seen in the city the past few weeks. We needed it gone â€" one way or another. Completely, truly wiped out.

"Tell the demo team they're cleared," I said, and quickly cut the connection at that.

Since there were no Prometheans here and we had to wait for the transports to arrive, I pulled off my helmet for a moment then and scrubbed my hand over my face. It'd been a long day, and it was only half done so far.

\_So close to finally clearing out the city,\_ I thought. \_And losing the portal. But so far. And the costâ€¦|\_

I looked back at the little girls in their father's arms again, sleeping peacefully thanks to the meds beside their dead and bloodied mother.

Sometimes, it was more than I could bear.

#### 48. Chapter 47: Two Hearts Beat as One

Author's Note: Chapter title comes from the excellent old-school U2 song.

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Forty-Seven: Two Hearts Beat as One<span>\*\*

\*\*1549 Hours, October 19, 2558. City of Charleston, South Carolina, United States. "The Sight," Planet Earth. Day Ninety-Two of the War of Tomorrow\*\*

Cooper had done it. She'd managed to secure both the city and the outskirts, eliminating the portal as well. Willis was extremely proud

when he heard, even though the last several weeks had really beaten him down. He was grateful for the respite he had now - that his whole air wing had.

Natalie had called it in a few days ago. She'd requested aid from any pilots on duty who weren't already busy running air strikes to come in and help airlift civilians out of the staging areas across Charleston. Today, it was the 87th's turn.

Newly arrived from the fighting in orbit, it took Hawk a moment to get reoriented with the Pelican rather than a Broadsword. He missed the agile fighter he'd practically called home for the past month, but returning to the hulking troop carrier was also like returning to an old friend.

Speaking of which...

"Hey, Talon, what do you got planned for the big reunion party?" Heat said over the COM channel, trying to infuse some light into the situation.

"Shut up," Willis was quick to respond. But inside his helmet, he smiled faintly. It was going to be really great to see his wife again. "Cooper's and my reunion is our business."

"Yeah, and anyone else who happens to be around when you see her."

"We'll keep it professional," Hawk said in a stiff tone. "Can the chatter."

The silence went on for a while until they were cleared to pass into the city. From up above, the devastation was clear.

"Jesus," Heat suddenly said. "And you thought we had it rough."

"We did," the major replied somberly. "But they might've had it worse."

A lot of the outer perimeter of the city was made up of rubble and debris. Hawk and his fellow pilots could see the scorch marks from the battles even up here, and even the buildings that stood hadn't been left unscathed.

"It must've been a helluva fight," Brandon murmured.

"Not unlike what we had to face. Misery loves company."

"Ain't that the truth, sir."

Willis felt his chest tighten at the destruction. To think Natalie had had all of this to deal with and had somehow succeeded, saving many hundreds of thousands of lives in the city...it spoke volumes about her leadership abilities. Of course, she'd be the first to say she hadn't done it alone, but Hawk knew the lengths she always went to to make sure everyone - from her Marines to pilots to the civilians - was safe. This was her victory, even if she wouldn't admit it.

"Hey, man, check it out," his buddy said over the COM then. "We're



coming up on downtown. Looks more upright than the rest. Maybe we could set down on one of those rooftops."

Major Hawk checked out his boards and then the view ahead from his cockpit. The captain was right. Willis opened a channel to the whole air wing and said, "87th, this is Flight Leader. We're coming up on some prime real estate up ahead, and it looks like it's one of our few options for a good landing. Let's make for those buildings."

The other pilots acknowledged, and again Willis felt a stab of hurt and regret. This moment should have been Collins's to see, and to lead. Instead, all of that had fallen onto his shoulders, and he still wasn't all that sure if he'd done a good enough job - or if he even wanted it. No one could possibly fill the other major's shoes, as she'd commanded the air wing for years and knew nearly all of them well. Her presence at the helm was sorely missed.

\_Another thing I'll have to tell Cooper,\_ he thought. \_My days hanging back as a flyboy first and foremost are over. Now, I have an entire air wing to run.\_

Natalie had always seemed comfortable with that. He wasn't.

Since the landing zones were coming up fast now, Hawk opened up a new line on the general channel. "Attention UNSC forces, this is Major Hawk of the 87th Air Wing, commanding. We're touching down on any rooftops in Sector Echo with enough clearance. We'll be ready to airlift civilians within the hour. Out."

Willis set his sights on one building in particular as he awaited reply from the ground. He wasn't sure if his hail would be received by the one person he really wanted to hear it, but it did. He just had to wait a couple of minutes.

"87th, this is 52nd Actual. We hear you loud and clear." Hawk could almost hear the grin in her voice, but also some of the weariness. "You're free to land on those rooftops. Rendezvous will be at SC-Four, over."

SC-4 was the denotation for one of the staging camps in the area - 4 being the largest, with a central location in the downtown square. It seemed Cooper had been busy after the fighting, too, setting up camps all over the district for the civvie survivors.

To his wife, he said, "Roger that, Actual. Be there in a few."

There was a pause on the line and Willis thought she'd cut the connection. But then Natalie's voice returned.

"Major...did you say you're commanding? What happened to your CO?"

He had a feeling the question was coming, but didn't know she'd address it this soon. "We got into some tough scrapes out in orbit, ma'am. I'll give you the details when we land."

"Roger."

With that the call ended abruptly, but Willis knew better than to think his wife wasn't curious. It was just a matter of not flooding

the general channel with what both preferred to remain a personal conversation. He was good with that.

In less than five minutes they'd executed the landing, a few Pelicans touching down on each one of the roofs. Hawk frowned then as he got out of the cockpit and looked down off the edge of the building. It was going to be tough getting some of the more critically injured civvies - and Marines - out of the city from here. He decided then that they were only equipped to take able bodies up the stairs. The rest would have to be moved elsewhere by Warthog before they could be evacuated out. Given the density of the city center, there was no way for them to land birds on the streets below. He keyed his COM.

"52nd Actual, be advised: we've completed our landing. I don't think we're going to be able to carry out the injured from here. Only mobiles."

"Acknowledged. We'll get the wounded out by 'Hog."

Willis smiled briefly to himself. \_Great minds,\_ he thought.

The pilots scrambled to descend the buildings then, finally arriving on the bottom floor ten minutes later. Hawk felt a surge of excitement and anticipation as he stepped out the door, but remembered that he was in a city that had only recently been secured. He kept his helmet on and his weapon up, grateful for the armor plating he'd donned and making sure he never let down his guard. He relayed orders to the rest of his air wing to do the same.

And then, a few blocks up, he saw her.

Cooper was standing inside one of the large open-air tents serving as a mess for the civvies in the staging camp. She had her helmet off and her rifle slung diagonally behind her, barrel pointing to the ground, and was conversing with a family sitting on one of the long benches as they ate. Something was off, though. The family consisted of two little girls and their father, but there was no mother present. Hawk frowned. \_I wonder if the mom...\_

Yes. Natalie's forlorn look in her green eyes said it all.

\_Damn, Coop,\_ he thought. \_The shit you must've seen here.\_ He glanced upward for a moment, reining in his emotions. \_And the shit I saw up there.\_

But he reminded himself for the moment that that didn't matter just yet. For now, he was here, as was she, and that was more than many other families and couples displaced by the fighting had. Tentatively he took a step closer, slinging his own gun behind him now and pulling off his helmet, until his legs started to move faster of their own volition. Natalie must have seen the movement out of the corner of her eye, because she looked up in his direction and stared.

Then finally beamed as she excused herself, and headed for him.

## **\*\*Chapter Forty-Eight: Reconnect\*\***

I couldn't contain my grin when I saw him, despite the surroundings. Everything else melted away in the moment as I watched him come towards me, stop, then wait for me to approach. We met somewhere in the middle. And it felt like I was reunited with a part of myself.

For the longest time I didn't let him go. I just hugged him tight and held on hard, just like he did me. It was a way for both of us to say to one another just what we'd been through in the past four weeks, without saying anything at all. I inhaled his scent as I buried my face in his shoulder above his armor, and I nearly lost my composure then and there. It was getting harder and harder for me to hold onto lately.

Finally I glanced up. His lips immediately met mine in a surging kiss that was somehow both tame and emotional, all at once. I kissed him back, thankfully remembering myself in time as I pulled back when it was over. But we didn't loosen our hold on each other just yet.

"Hi, Cooper," he said softly.

"Hi."

"I've missed you."

"Me, too. So much."

We pulled back a little more and our eyes met, both of us clearly wanting more, but aware that we couldn't do that here. And it was obvious - from him and probably from me, too - that more needed to be said that couldn't be uttered in front of an audience.

Eventually I let go and said, "Come on. Let's go someplace more quiet. And less packed."

My husband looked around again, taking in the bustle of the area. Then he nodded. "All right."

As I'd done with Ethan, I went over to Staff Sergeant Lynch and told him to give us a few minutes. Now that the city was secure, it was a lot less risky to get some distance from my security detail than it'd been earlier. I was glad to have this time to ourselves, however short it might be.

We stopped walking when we neared a street divider a little further out. It had a small patch of grass with a tree in the middle that seemed the perfect place to take a quick break. I thought it must've been a nice thing to have before the invasion. Now, half the tree was scorched black on one side, missing branches and leaves and a good chunk of its canopy. Still, it was some small specter of natural beauty in this place to hold onto.

I sat down on the ground and stretched my legs out in front of me, knees bent a little as I draped my arms over them casually. Close by but out of earshot, we could still see the corner of the mess tent from here, so we weren't outside the perimeter. That made it all the more safe to be here. I liked the spot's rare combination of security and privacy.

Willis sat down next to me and positioned himself almost the same way to my left. I'd wanted to see him for weeks, but now that he was finally here, I was having a hard time trying to figure out where to start - what to say. There'd been so much that had occurred in such a short time that I hadn't had a second to process much myself, let alone explain it all to someone else. But he seemed to understand this and released a small sigh before scooting closer, our sides touching. I finally let myself relax a bit and leaned over, resting my head on his shoulder as I briefly closed my eyes.

"Looks like you guys fought a helluva battle here, Coop," he said. "I still can't believe you did this."

"A lot of people say things like 'blood, sweat, and tears', but it really took all that to get what you see now," I responded, opening my eyes then and sitting up straight again. "It's definitely been no picnic down here."

"Wasn't upstairs, either."

"I know. We heard."

From the moment I'd heard his voice on the general channel, I'd wanted to ask how it was that he came to be the 87th Air Wing's commander. But seeing him in person now, up close, I already knew. I was positive Major Erin Collins was dead.

Still, I had to ask to confirm. "Your command...?"

My husband shook his head, staring down at the grass. "Collins was killed when the nuke went off." Then he suddenly glanced over at me. "That man and his kids you were talking to just now? Where was the mother?"

It was my turn to hesitate and avoid his gaze. Finally I released a long, tired sigh. "Dead. I found them in an apartment building hallway, huddled around each other. The two little girls were bleeding and nearly passed out by their mom's body, and the dad was just...hysterical." I swallowed. "Both kids had been shot in the head. It was touch and go for a while there for them, but they're recovering well now since Reynolds patched them up. I think they'll be okay." \_Physically, at least\_ was left unsaid. "I saw them and their dad eating in the mess tent a few minutes ago and wanted to see how they were doing."

The news was so grim on both sides that neither of us replied after that. The silence in between was more burnt-out and weary than uncomfortable. I had the sense that both of us had reached some sort of limit with the tragedy, some level of emotion we couldn't go beyond from here without going completely numb.

I hated to bring it up, but had to ask. "We heard your unit lost a lot of pilots. How many?"

Willis ran his hand over his light brown hair and answered quickly, "Two squadrons."

"My God." I shut my eyes tight as I pinched the bridge of my nose. The number of dead in orbit couldn't possibly rival those we'd lost

on the ground - mostly civilians - but it sure wasn't a number you could look past.

"What about here? How many made it out?"

"Six hundred eighty thousand people," I responded. "Out of nine hundred-kay."

"Over two hundred thousand dead," my husband whispered. "Jesus Christ."

"Yeah. It was bad. I wish..." I swallowed for the second time. "I wish I could have done more."

He looked at me then, getting my attention by placing his hand on mine. The touch was comforting. "You've got it all wrong, Natalie. I don't think anyone else could have done as much as you did. You're the reason so many people survived."

I snorted. "Tell that to the girls' mother."

The quiet crept in again and kept us in our own minds for a while, possibly contemplating the level of horror the other had gone through. I certainly was with Willis. He eventually broke the unbearable silence.

"And my little brother?"

"He's alive, and doing as good as can be expected. He lost more than a couple of squadmates, and we all know how hard that can be."

"Yeah." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Damn. Poor kid. I'll have to talk to him when I see him."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

I turned to face him and raised an eyebrow. "You just inherited a whole air wing. How is that...how are you feeling?"

I was expecting him to say any number of things I'd felt when I'd found myself in his shoes over the years - overwhelmed, nervous, determined. Instead, he blew out a breath and shook his head.

"I don't know, Coop." He swallowed this time. "To be honest, I don't know if I even want this. All I've ever wanted to be was a pilot. Taking on a squadron or two over the years seemed natural once I had the experience, sure, but this...this is a lot more responsibility than I'd ever want."

I steadily held his gaze. "But it's yours," I stated plainly. "Like it or not, want it or not, it is your command now." To me, it was clear as day. Nothing else, no other possibility. I couldn't understand what he meant by wanting it, as if he had a choice. "Those pilots look to you now, Will. You have to lead them."

He let out a humorless chuckle and shook his head again. "It's not that simple, honey."

"It is. You can't be thinking of leaving them high and dry when they just lost their leader and two squadrons of fellow flyboys and friends. Willis, you can't do that to them - "

"Cooper, I'm not like you. This is...new territory for me. And it's not something that comes naturally. Flying does." He leaned forward to grasp his ankles with his hands, lost in the conversation. "It's one of the only things that's ever made sense for me. You and flying. Not leading. Not...being a commander of anything."

"But you already are one," I pressed. "Kilo and Victor Squadrons? Those have been yours for a while now. And you lead them very well. Add that to being the ace pilot I know you are, and it sounds to me like you've got the perfect CSV to be in charge."

He glanced over at me, uncertain. "You think so?"

I smiled faintly. "I know so." Then I found myself with a wicked smirk on my face. "There's two things you're exceedingly good at, honey. One is in the cockpit, and the other's in bed."

That got a genuine guffaw from him this time. "Okay. If you say so, Coop." He leaned in close and whispered, "You're not so bad yourself at that last one, you know."

His words sent a delicious shiver through me, but there was still way too much to get done for anything like that to happen for a while. Secure city or no, there was still a lot to wrap up here in Charleston. And after that came Savannah, in Georgia. The sudden thought sobered me and I released a sigh.

"Come on," I said, beginning to get up. "I think we've lingered here long enough. You need to get back to your pilots and start evacing the civvies who're mobile. And I need to - "

I paused as my helmet crackled in my hand, and I looked down at it only to realize someone was trying to hail me. Worried something new had come up, I shoved the bucket on my head fast and answered, "This is Colonel Cooper, go ahead."

"Natalie. It's me."

Ethan. I frowned. "Yeah? What's going on? Did something happen?"

He chuckled on the other end. "Well, I guess that depends on your definition."

Growling into the COM, I said, "Ethan, I don't have time for games. Tell me. Now."

"All right. Major Delaney wanted me to let you know that we've finished mopping up the area here in the outskirts. And that the 904th Battalion and I are on our way into the city as we speak, as you ordered."

"ETA?" I asked.

"Shouldn't be too much longer now. Maybe ten minutes."

"Acknowledged. Cooper out."

I cut the connection before my ex wasted even more of my time. I'd gotten the information I needed and that was all the interaction I ever wanted to have with him again.

Although that was probably just wishful thinking on my part, as we still had Georgia to go through and clear out after this. I massaged my temples for a moment before looking at Willis once more, finally glancing over to see that his mouth had gone into a thin, tight line.

"Was that him?" he asked in a controlled tone.

I nodded. "Yeah." I pulled off my helmet and took in a breath, then continued, "Will, there's something you need to know."

My husband's gorgeous hazel eyes narrowed, and I almost felt like he'd read me before I'd even spoken a word.

"What?" he ground out.

## 50. Chapter 49: Collision

### \*\*Chapter Forty-Nine: Collision\*\*

"Ethan tried to kiss me," I said in a rush. Then I shook my head at myself and amended, "No. He did. I just didn't kiss him back."

Willis stood there a moment without saying anything, and it was the first time in a long time that I couldn't read his expression. All I could do was stand silently waiting for his response as my heart hammered in my chest. I'd wanted to tell him what had happened for a while now - needed to - but I also needed him to understand that it had been a one-way interaction only.

Finally, he settled on a carefully neutral tone as he asked, "When?"

"A few weeks ago, when the assault began. Will, I swear to you I did nothing to invite it. I stopped working with him as soon as it happened, and I - "

"I believe you."

That stopped me mid-sentence. "What?"

"I said I believe you. You told me you wanted nothing from him, and I said I trusted you. I meant that, Natalie." His hazel eyes narrowed. "The person I don't trust, and never will, is him. And I can fully believe he'd pull something like that with you. The fucking bastard."

I watched as the ire returned to his face, making his eyes smolder. Then he glanced back at me again, meeting my gaze.

"Where is he?"

"On his way here with Delaney's battalion," I answered, then quickly stepped closer to grab his arm. "But Willis, please don't - "

He let out a mirthless laugh and gently shrugged me off. "Oh, no. He's going to get what's coming to him. Again. I won't let him do that shit to you, Cooper."

"I appreciate that, but I can handle it." I blew out a breath, exasperated. "And I'm not asking for his sake, believe me. I'm asking for yours. I don't want this ruining your career, especially now that you're commander of - "

If ever there was an award for being at the wrong place at the wrong time, my ex would take it, hands down. Ethan suddenly appeared in the street on his own, holding his helmet in one hand, obviously searching for me. His eyes brightened when he saw me, but then he noticed Willis, too, and a brief look of surprise crossed his face. Although, since it was Ethan, he covered it very quickly - and well - with a smug grin, continuing to approach.

Willis immediately stepped between us and curled up his fists at his sides, looking even angrier than I'd seen him at LP Alpha. "Did you kiss my wife?"

"What's the matter, Hawk? Can't stand a little healthy competition?"

"I'm not going to ask again, you little prick. Answer me."

"Yeah, I did," Ethan replied. "What of it?"

My husband was a blur of motion and before I could stop it, he'd lunged for Ethan, grabbing hold of his shoulders with both hands before rearing his right fist for a devastating blow to Ethan's jaw. I heard the crunching hit and my ex's loud groan, but Ethan was fast too and recovered quickly. He dove beneath Willis's next swing and rammed into his side, shoving him backwards into the grass and punching him back as he landed on top of him.

I snapped out of my shocked paralysis then and shouted, "What the hell are you two doing? Stop!"

But there was nothing stopping them this time. They wrestled for a moment on the ground until Willis punched Ethan in the side of the head and got the upper hand once more, straddling him as he reached for his throat to pin him down.

"Willis! For God's sake, stop!" I yelled out, but in the next moment Ethan had managed to hit him hard in the leg, causing my husband to howl and Ethan to gear back up in the fight. My ex sat up and rolled out of the way, standing before Willis had recovered and landing a sickening crack on his face. Willis's hands went up to his nose, now streaming with blood, and I saw his expression go dark as he retaliated by kicking Ethan in the balls with his boot. That ended the fighting quick, with Ethan dropping down into the grass with a moan, holding himself with both hands.

In the meantime Willis stood fully now, still holding onto his bleeding nose, and stood over him. He had one fist raised for more,



but Ethan just shook his head. I saw the anger still blazing in my husband's eyes, but I knew he knew not to take things too far. Breathing heavy, he let up and relaxed his stance, finally letting it go.

"Are we done here?" Willis asked, voice raspy from the fistfight. He wiped the blood under his nose with his sleeve. "Or do you need me to teach you another lesson to \_stay the fuck away from her\_?"

Ethan finally pushed himself up on the ground with an elbow, keeping his other hand firmly below the belt. "All right, Willis. You win." He paused to suck in a deep breath of air, his jaw already red from my husband's initial hit, and the side of his lip split and bleeding. "You win," he repeated. "Again."

"You won't go near Natalie anymore?" Willis pressed.

"Yes, okay? I won't."

"Good. Now get the fuck out of here."

Ethan looked up at him with contempt, but slowly started to rise, stopping once to wince before lying back down for a moment, then trying again. When he was finally on his feet, he walked away sluggishly, still holding onto that precious spot. I wondered, half amused, how he was going to explain his injuries.

And I thought the same for Willis, who stood beside me now clutching his still-bleeding nose.

"Come here," I said, having him stop in front of me. I gingerly put my hands on either side of his face to look him over and he winced. I didn't know why, but I found it kind of endearing. "You don't need to go around fighting to defend my honor, you know. But it is pretty damn cute."

"I just want that asshole to know his place," he responded roughly, but his expression softened when our eyes met. "I love you, Cooper."

I pressed my lips gently to his. "I love you, too, honey, but you're not exactly a cage fighter. We should go see Doc about your nose. It looks like it might be broken."

"That fucker. I'm glad I got him back." He smirked a little. "He'll be hurting for days."

I made a face. "That's...not something I want to think about. Let's just go get you checked out real quick."

\* \* \*

><p>When we entered the large medtent in the staging camp, I almost hated coming in to have my husband looked over for very avoidable injuries. The place wasn't as full as it had been a few days after the battle had ended, but it was still fairly busy. I hoped we'd be able to get Reynolds to do the once-over, but there was no telling who might be available to handle the request. I could have used my rank to get him to see us right away, but it didn't feel right given the nature of the injuries, so I didn't.<p>

Thankfully, the medic saw us on our way in - and oddly, approached us with a knowing grin.

"Good to see you, ma'am, sir," he said, then looked at Willis. "Let me guess, sir - you \_fell\_, right?"

Willis frowned, the motion making him wince again. "What?"

"That's what the last guy said when he came in. Lieutenant Commander Ackerson. Looks like you both \_fell\_ in very similar and very interesting fashions. Come on," he went on, sweeping his arm towards a partitioned area. "I'll get you looked at."

When we stepped inside Willis sat down on the cot, hands gripping the sides by his knees, while I stood next to him in the cramped space, arms folded across my chest. Doc Reynolds moved between us and pulled up a chair, sitting in front of my husband to assess him.

"Well, you must've taken a good tumble, Major," Reynolds said, peering at his face. "That's a broken nose all right." His grin returned. "But at least it wasn't your junk like your buddy, am I right?"

"He's not my friend," Willis bit out, and I rolled my eyes at both of them.

"Doc, lay off the jokes. I'm not in the mood today. Please just look him over and we'll be out of your hair."

Reynolds held up his hands. "Yes, ma'am. Sorry."

After providing Willis with some gauze and an ice pack to hold over his nose, the medic produced a penlight from his pocket and checked both of his eyes, one by one. After that he checked his head for injuries and pressed on his sore side, where Willis indicated he'd "\_fallen particularly hard\_"...onto Ethan's fist. Reynolds said the spot would be tender for a few days and probably bruise, but otherwise was nothing to worry about.

"Thanks, Michael," I said as we were leaving. "For checking my husband for his terrible \_fall\_."

A corner of his lips twitched. "You're welcome, ma'am. Anytime."

With that I let out a sigh of relief. Knowing Ethan, I knew he could have easily blown the incident out of proportion to meet his needs, putting the blame somehow on Willis and using it to try to ruin him. But he hadn't. Instead, he'd covered for the both of them, whether or not Reynolds actually believed it, saving them both from any disciplinary action. It made me pause. The old Ethan wouldn't have done that.

"Natalie? What are you thinking?"

I looked over at Willis to find him staring at me, curious. I shrugged. "Nothing."

"Don't do that," he said softly.

Finally, I sighed. "Okay. I was just thinking that Ethan didn't have to do what he did back there. Make up a story instead of turn you in."

He snorted. "It served him well to cover up the fight, too, not just me."

"I know, but I expected him to - nevermind." I shook my head. "I was just worried since you'd just gotten your wings back not too long ago, and now you're in charge. I'm glad nothing's going to come of this."

"Me, too." He reached out and put his arm around my shoulders - briefly, because we were now out in the square. "But you're more important to me than that."

A feeling of warmth settled in my chest at his words, and I wanted to kiss right then and there. Yet I couldn't. Instead I grasped his hand between us and squeezed. "You know, what Ethan did wasn't the only news I wanted to give you when I saw you today."

He furrowed his eyebrows at me. "Yeah? What else has been going on since you left orbit?"

"I've been feeling a little...under the weather this past week," I said, giving him a tentative glance before meeting his eyes. "I think I might be pregnant."

## 51. Chapter 50: Razor's Edge

### \*\*Chapter Fifty: Razor's Edge\*\*

Willis took a moment to register what I'd said, and when he did, his grin lit up his whole face. "Are you serious?"

"Yup." I smirked. "And don't ask how it happened, because I think you know the answer to that."

He laughed, half from excitement. "Wow. I didn't think it'd happen this fast."

"We never seem to have good timing on this, do we?" I looked away for a second. "When I went off my pills before I left for Requiem, I wasn't expecting to see you for months. Maybe even a year. I wasn't exactly prepared when I bumped into you just two months later."

"Me, either. But I'm glad we weren't." Though he knew it technically violated policy, he was so excited and thrilled at the prospect that he leaned in to kiss me. "I've been wanting another baby with you since Khan, Coop. But I knew you couldn't when you got accepted into War College, and I thought...I thought we'd have to wait a long time."

"Yeah. I'm not sure what'll happen with that now, but I guess we'll see once we get home. They said they'd defer my attendance for a while for a combat mission, but I don't know about this." I kissed him back. "But I'm happy, too. You're a great husband and a good father, Will. If we are having this kid, he or she is going to be

very lucky to have you for a dad."

His grin widened and he kissed me again. By then I realized if we kept this up we'd be creating a scene, so I pulled back when it was done, still smiling.

Glancing out at the staging camp around us, and all the people - civilians and military - I sobered and said, "Well, it's not going to be a walk in the park finding out we're having another baby in the middle of all this."

Willis's expression got more serious, too. "What are you going to do? We're supposed to be going to Savannah next."

I sighed. "I don't know. But I do know that honestly, in my position, I shouldn't even be on the frontlines anymore. I think if I hang back in the command tent with General Bolowsky, like he might've preferred all along, I'll be okay and can still participate. The portal's gone so it should just be some cleanup operations as we go further south."

"Good. So that means no crazy stunts, or going anywhere unsafe?"

I shook my head. "None. Not after Ecuador. And that wasn't my choice."

"I know," my husband replied quietly. Then it seemed he thought of something else, because he turned to face me again, an inquisitive look in his eyes. "What about the drinking? Have you had any alcohol lately?"

"Not a drop," I said. "Nothing since Requiem." I shifted my stance. "It's been a little rough, but I'm glad now that I haven't touched the stuff in months."

He smiled faintly. "Soon to be nearly a \_year\_."

I scrunched up my face, almost physically hurt. "Don't remind me. Please." When I opened my eyes again, I said more seriously, "But in a way, I think this might be good." I'd have to go cold turkey, but hopefully this way I could kick the habit before it really started.

I realized now that the alcohol had gotten to be too much of a crutch for me since returning home from Khan. Although given the amount of devastation here, I wasn't sure how plausible it was going to be to stay away from it. After giving birth would the nightmares come back? Would I have new ones from what I'd seen here over the past month in South Carolina, or what we would encounter soon in Georgia? Or Requiem before that? I didn't know. But I did know I was staying far away from \_anything\_ harmful as long as I was carrying our child.

"Natalie?"

I returned from my thoughts and found Willis looking at me again. "Yeah?"

He frowned. "Is there a reason you haven't gone to find out for sure yet?"

Again I found my attention drifting through the camp, full of refugees still and with plenty of work to be done, even after securing the city. Plus more in Savannah. "Too busy, mostly," I answered honestly. "But I also didn't want to stir the pot quite yet. I was going to let Bolowsky know before we left for Georgia."

"Well, now's the time, right? I'd like to go with you."

He seemed anxious to find out if the possibility were true, and to be honest, so was I at this point. It would help to know what I could and couldn't do from here on out, and if I were even going to be allowed to join in on the campaign in Georgia, even from afar. And right now, my husband was here as well, so I wouldn't have to go through it all alone. I finally lifted my hands up and sighed.

"Why the hell not? Let's go see Doc again."

\* \* \*

><p>Reynolds was surprised to see us walk out of the medical tent only to return a few minutes later. His immediate reaction was one of concern - for Willis. "Sir? Is something wrong from the <em>fall<em> still?"

"Nope. I think you patched me up pretty good, Doc. This time we're here for the lieutenant colonel."

He looked me up and down, confused. "She seems fine to me, sir."

"We've...got a bit of a potential situation we'd like cleared up."

It took a second, but Reynolds eventually got the hint and nodded. "Sure thing, Major. Let's head back to where we were and I'll administer the test."

\* \* \*

><p>As we sat waiting in the partitioned area again - I wouldn't exactly call it a room - I turned to face Willis after a while.<p>

"As much as I'd like you here with me, you should get to helping your air wing out with the evac once we know."

"I know. I wasn't planning on staying here much longer, even if I'd like to."

I smiled faintly. "See you in Savannah, right?"

He reached over and took my hand in his, stroking it with his thumb. "Maybe. Let's hear what he says."

The medic returned to our section then holding his datapad, currently scrolling through tons of data. It finally stopped on an open file and he looked down to read it. When he glanced up again, he was smiling.

"Ma'am, sir, congratulations. You're four weeks pregnant, Colonel."

"Yes!" Willis shouted, turning to me instantly to give me a quick kiss and a hard embrace. I found myself grinning too as we held onto each other.

A well of emotion opened up inside me as I marveled at the fact that despite everything that had occurred in the past few months - from the fighting on Requiem to the long, miserable trip back to Earth and the battles to save the cities of the East Coast - something good had come out of this. Something pure and new and living. We were going to have our fifth child, and though the timing was a little off, I found I couldn't have received more uplifting news after all the tragedy we'd both been through recently. All the lives we'd seen ripped away from us, and from others. All the carnage and ruin and heartbreak.

In a way, it was this that we'd been fighting for all along. The chance to feel happy again, together, and to go back to our normal lives post-war and Khan after this.

"I love you, Will," I whispered to him fiercely as we pulled back a bit, resting our foreheads together.

My husband just smiled and replied, "I love you, too, Natalie."

In front of us, Doc Reynolds cleared his throat. "So? Am I telling the general, or you, ma'am?"

"I'll do it," I said. "I'd like to still be in that convoy headed south when we go, so I think he should hear it from me."

## 52. Chapter 51: A Return to Normalcy

### \*\*Chapter Fifty-One: A Return to Normalcy\*\*

\*\*\*1320 Hours, December 2, 2558. UNSC Concord Naval Air Base, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Last Goodbye," Planet Earth. Two Weeks After the Battle for Savannah's End\*\*\*

As I looked out at the sea of Marines and Navy personnel in Class A dress uniforms surrounding us, I frowned when I didn't see him. It was like he'd just vanished after Savannah - and for some reason I couldn't quite put my finger on, that didn't sit well with me.

"Natalie?" Willis said behind me, and I turned around to face him. "They're going to be starting soon. We should go get our seats."

"Right."

I nodded and quickly followed him through the throng of military members, my chestful of medals clinking along with me, the sound grating just a little on my nerves. It was the one thing I hated about having to be dressed to the nines instead of in our usual fatigues. Too much pomp and circumstance for me.

After telling my higher-ups I was expecting back in Charleston, I'd been granted conditional clearance to go to Georgia with the rest of my 52nd Regiment when the time came, shortly after things were wrapped up in South Carolina. The only stipulation was that I stay out of hot zones and remain safely with the rear echelon units inside the command tent, along with Brigadier General Bolowsky, and send out orders with him from there. That'd been fine by me, and we'd gotten through the area in Georgia in three weeks. In that time, the remaining smaller cities with a strong Storm and Promethean presence had been cleared as well. Earth was safe again...for now.

And yet I couldn't figure out where my ex had disappeared to. I hadn't spoken to him at all since Charleston, but I knew he'd gone in with our unit in Savannah based on rosters. And now that that was over, too, he was gone. He'd been a pain in the ass to deal with and had caused more than enough trouble with his antics while we'd been forcibly paired together, but it felt wrong to leave without saying a word. For all his faults, I'd seen him make significant strides over the last few months.

But that was a mystery that might not ever be solved - and in some ways, I was glad for the easy out. Maybe it really was for the best.

"Come on," my husband hurried me as he took my hand. He turned to face me briefly and grinned. "We get front-row seats now."

I snorted, finding his enthusiasm for something so minor silly, but lovable at the same time. "All right, all right," I said. "Don't rush me, or I might throw up on my nice polished shoes."

In Savannah, Willis had begun to come into his own a bit as the new commander of the 87th Air Wing. I'd been very proud of his progress, and he continued to grow more comfortable with the role every day. One thing he couldn't seem to get over, however, was all the preferential treatment he now received, even outside the unit - stuff like front-row seats here today.

Although, I kind of doubted having coveted seats for a funeral was really something anyone desired. For Willis, I thought it was more the idea of it rather than the reality. Because the general mood in the auditorium when the ceremony started was truly somber and subdued.

The memorial was for all those we'd lost during the invasion, and so both General Bolowsky and Willis's normally out-of-sight commander, Colonel Patrick Finnegan, were both slated to speak. The numbers of those who'd perished in Savannah were significantly lower than in Charleston, the main epicenter of the attack, but many had died before we'd even arrived, holding the enemy back all on their own to save the city's people.

Entering from the wings of the stage, Bolowsky approached the podium at center first, adjusting the mike to be heard. The left side of his chest glittered with rows upon rows of colorful ribbons and medals, and I was in awe of the famous commander I'd had the pleasure of serving with twice - once during the War, and now again here on Earth, five years later.

"Ladies and gentlemen, these types of ceremonies are not my strong

suit," the brigadier general began. "I hate to lose Marines and sailors under my command, but sometimes, such sacrifice is necessary. Both for the mission, and for the people they exist to protect." He paused to take a breath before continuing. "When this invasion began, we were barely prepared for what came after us. What little warning we did have was thanks to a bright, gutsy Marine I know - and my XO throughout the campaign - Lieutenant Colonel Natalie Cooper."

Surprised by the mention, I caught the general's eyes and gave him a slight nod of thanks.

"Thanks to her efforts we had at least some time to collect ourselves before the Prometheans and Storm arrived in space. Unfortunately, despite our best attempts, many of our servicemen and -women - both groundside and in orbit - were called to make the ultimate sacrifice, so that Earth could be kept safe.

"We honor each and every one of them here today. And as a sign of our remembrance - as a sign that we'll never forget - I've commissioned the building of a memorial plaque with the names of all the souls we lost in this second invasion of our home planet. This will include civilian lives as well. I hope to unveil it to you all soon."

The crowd burst into applause then, although the feeling remained one of sad pride in those we lost. Beside me, I could see Willis looking up at the general in solemn gratitude, for doing something to remember all the pilots and buddies he'd lost in the fighting upstairs. And the CO I knew he sorely missed.

"We will not forget the heroes who made today possible for us to see, in safety and tranquility. Semper fidelis, Marines."

"Oorah!" all of us assembled in the crowd shouted back.

We stood there for several minutes awaiting the next speaker, and shortly, he came to the front as well. Colonel Finnegan was a stout man, clearly more built for ground work than flying in a cockpit, which was probably why he didn't do it anymore. Willis's eyes darkened when he took the stage. He'd told me long ago he wasn't fond of the "desk jockey", thanks to years of belittling Major Collins for her command of the 87th in the skies, while he remained in the nice, cushy safety of an executive office back home. It seemed a waste that he was the one to represent her and the other pilots they'd lost, rather than my husband.

"Marines and sailors, we're here today to honor our dead. We all fought the good fight in our own way when the aliens and robots came a knockin', but some of the trickiest maneuvers were pulled out in space, above orbit, where no land-dwelling grunt could see."

I frowned at his choice of words, as I was sure many who'd been planetside did as well. I had no doubt the fighting in space had been just as tough - and maybe even more perilous in a lot of ways - but it was just in bad taste for the branches to try to one-up each other at such an occasion.

"While the invasion raged down on the ground, we were upstairs working hard to make sure no other enemy forces could make it to the surface. We also nuked the biggest damn Promethean ship I'd ever



seen, with a devastating weapon onboard that literally wiped a whole large city clean. If it hadn't been for our skilled pilots and Special Forces teams, places like Charleston and Savannah would have met the same fate as New Phoenix. But another major catastrophe was averted, thanks to our flyboys in gray."

Willis rolled his eyes and leaned over to me once the colonel had finished speaking, whispering, "Yeah, like this clown knows. He keeps saying 'we' but he wasn't even out there with us. All he has is the holos to prove it happened."

A smirk tugged at the corner of my lips, but I said nothing. General Bolowsky soon appeared again as Colonel Finnegan walked off the stage, the two passing each other rather coolly. It seemed to me like Bolowsky couldn't get rid of him fast enough.

"Thank you, Colonel Finnegan," Bolowsky said, likely out of courtesy only. Then he turned to face the crowd. "If anyone would like to say a few words for the fallen, the mike is now open."

Much to my surprise, my husband was the first to move forward to walk onto the stage. He did so without a word, yet collected. It seemed he'd been waiting a long time for this moment - ever since Collins and his fellow pilots' deaths. He looked calm and poised behind the podium, despite having rarely made speeches before - and probably never to a crowd this size. Practically our whole base was here today.

"Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Major William Hawk," he began, looking out at the sea of uniforms before glancing down at the podium, then back again, his voice returning strong. "As the new CO of the 87th Air Wing, I don't have a lot of experience being in charge like my wife, Lieutenant Colonel Cooper."

That got a few chuckles, but he sobered quickly.

"But I do know what a good leader looks like - and, more importantly - what being a good leader takes. My former CO, Major Erin Collins, was just that. We served together for many years and for some reason, she saw potential in me when I still pretty young, and eventually made me her XO. Now I have enormous shoes to fill that I'm not sure I ever can. She built an amazing rapport with all her pilots, knew all the ins and outs of command, and tried her best to do it all so that I didn't feel a lot of the burden most of the time. She was truly a great commander for us."

He paused then, and I watched him swallow hard before continuing. "Probably the best example of her character was in her death. She knew we had to nuke that Promethean ship in order for the people on the ground to survive. She knew we would lose people of our own in doing so, and there was no way around that. There was no time. Rather than save herself, and leave others behind whom she'd known, and whom she'd led, Major Collins decided that she would be with them till the end. She was with them in life as well as death, and it will always mean a lot to me to know that the people I knew and worked with, too, didn't die alone out in space. Thanks to her."

With that his speech ended and he walked down off the stage, his face impassive the whole way, even though I knew inside he was hurting at the loss of his CO and his friends. It hurt me in turn to see him

like that, and I couldn't wait for us to get alone so he could finally unburden himself and not have to hide his feelings. But that wouldn't be for a while still. For now, there was the senior officers' reception after this.

\* \* \*

><p>Nothing made me more unsettled than a collection of colonels and generals in impeccable dress uniforms enjoying themselves at a somber occasion, but that's exactly what was happening here in the grand hall on base, following the remembrance ceremony. People were talking and laughing and drinking champagne - except me, of course - without much of a care in the world now that the official functions were over. Most of them hadn't been on the ground with us - or in space, as Willis had pointed out about Colonel Finnegan. They were just enjoying the party and the fact that the fighting was now done. <em>We</em> were the ones who'd have to live with what we'd seen. I found it all a little stomach-turning, and not because of the obvious.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. Just the Marine I was looking for."

I was taking a drink from my glass of sparkling water beside Willis when I looked up to see Brigadier General Bolowsky coming toward us. Unlike the others, he wasn't cackling like an idiot or tipsy yet. Instead, he had a sort of grim smile on his face at all the hoopla - kind of like me.

"Sir," my husband and I said in unison, but Bolowsky was quick to wave us off.

"Colonel, Major. If you two don't mind me saying so, you don't look like you're enjoying yourselves very much."

"Permission to speak freely, sir?" I asked, and waited for his nod. "I'm not sure I find the atmosphere appropriate for what we went through. Not just us boots on the ground, but the sailors and pilots, too - and the civvies, sir. All of this grandeur is just...not really my scene."

The brigadier general laughed. "You prefer the battlefield. I know that about you, Cooper, and that's exactly why you made one of the best XO's for the ground campaign." He held out his hand to me to shake. "Excellent work, Colonel. A lot of our success in Charleston and Savannah were due to your orders and actions. The survivors in both cities have much to be thankful for because of that."

I had a genuine grin on my face as I shook his hand. "Thank you, sir. I did what I could." Then the grin disappeared. "The people deserved it after it was me who brought this on them."

"You may see it that way, but not others. Certainly I don't. What happened with the portal on Requiem was, I felt, inevitable. You gave us the warning, and you came back to save them. That's what you should be focusing on."

"Yes, sir." I still wasn't sure how much I believed that, but found that agreeing with him was best.

"Earth is in your debt once again, Cooper." He glanced over at Willis

then. "Major, you can be very proud of the work your wife's done here. I think it's wonderful that you'll both be getting a much-deserved rest now."

"Thank you, sir," Willis replied. "And I am proud."

"Good." The general nodded to us then to excuse himself. "Congratulations to you both on the upcoming new arrival. Colonel, when you're ready to return to action, let me know. I'll put in a good word for you at the College in case they're on the fence about taking you back."

"I will, sir. Thanks."

He left us with a warm smile, and I found that I was going to miss working with him. He was a war hero yet down-to-earth, in addition to being a great leader. He was exactly the kind of commander I was very happy to serve under.

"There you go, Coop," Willis said next to me with a grin, taking a drink from his champagne flute. "Looks like you got all your ducks lined up still. Don't even have to worry about missing out on your chance to make full colonel."

"Yeah," I answered with a smile of my own. "That's good to know. But even if it didn't work out, I think I would've been okay." I placed a hand on my abdomen and looked down. It'd be a while still before I started to show, but the action was still comforting. "I just want the baby to be healthy and safe."

Willis put his arm around me momentarily. "She will be. Or he. The Prometheans and the Storm are gone now."

\_At least for the moment,\_ I thought. But knowing what had occurred in the past, just how long would that last?

But now wasn't the time to linger on that. Now was the time to remember the lost, and to look forward to the future.

\* \* \*

><p>It was early evening by the time the ceremony and festivities were over and we got home. The kids were excited to see us, as we'd just gotten back a couple weeks ago from the fighting up north. I'd been relieved to know that the three of them had been safe the whole time, and never touched by news of the invasion, although their caretakers had been worried for a while.<p>

Probably the biggest shock to their lives wasn't that their father and I were home so soon, or that AI-bots and aliens had attacked the Earth \_again\_. Nope. Their biggest concern was when they learned they were getting a new sibling soon.

"What?" Gabriel had asked, confused.

"Really?" Olivia had said excitedly.

"\_Why?\_" Liam had moaned.

I couldn't help but chuckle at my youngest son's reaction, knowing

this might be the toughest on him given his current status as the family baby. I drew all the kids in close and said, "It's going to be a big change for all of us. But I know you'll love your new brother or sister when they get here. And it means I'm not going anywhere for a long time."

"You said that before, Mom," Gabe reminded me. "But then you left anyway."

At that I nodded and sighed. It was a fair point. "I did, and I'm sorry about that. But this time it's different. Until I have your brother or sister, I can't go anywhere. So I will be home now, for sure. Promise."

Obviously still skeptical, Gabriel looked to his dad for reassurance. "Is that true, Dad?"

Willis bent down to hug all three kids as well. "That's true, Gabe. Your mom is guaranteed to be home for at least a year."

"What about you, Daddy?" Olivia asked.

"I don't know, honey," my husband answered honestly. "I'm in charge of a lot of pilots now, and they might need me sometime. But one of us will always be here with you."

That seemed to satisfy them for the moment. And presently, as I shrugged out of my uniform jacket and hung it up in the bedroom closet, I wondered if that was enough to make things simple for now.

I could really use some simple after the past year or so we'd had.

\* \* \*

><p>After the kids were in bed and asleep, later that night, I sat exhausted on the couch in front of the holoscreen, unable to sleep. Willis was next to me and I snuggled in closer to his side, closing my eyes and letting the heat from his body radiate around me. It felt odd to feel so relaxed after so much had happened in the last few months. But at least now we were safe, and home.<p>

"Something's been bugging me," he finally said, and I opened my eyes again and lifted my head up a bit to look at him.

"What?"

"Where was Ethan today? Hell, where has he been since Savannah?" He sat up a little straighter to meet my gaze. "Did Lloyd mention anything to you? A new assignment or something?"

"Not that I know of," I said. "Although I thought it was weird that he just left, too."

"I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm glad the asshole's gone, but...I don't know. Something isn't right."

I shrugged. I really had no idea myself, so it was all I could do. "Honestly, I just figured it's for the best. What he's up to now is

his problem. Why dwell on it, you know? We've got our own stuff to think about right now." I reached out for his hand and placed it lightly on my stomach. "And we have this new baby to look forward to."

Slowly a bright grin enveloped my husband's face, and he leaned down to kiss my tummy. Then he raised his head up to kiss me on the lips. "You're right, Cooper. You're exactly right."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Note:<strong> I went back and forth a bit with deciding whether I wanted to actually write out the battle in Savannah or not. Eventually I chose to do a time-skip instead, as you can see. I was going to be very limited with what I could put Cooper through, and in the end I figured it wasn't going to be very fun to write, or read. I hope you guys found it okay and got enough action out of Charleston, haha.

And now...one last chapter to go!

### 53. Epilogue

**\*\*Epilogue\*\***

\*\*\*\*Six Months Later. \*\*\*\*\*1942 Hours, May 25, 2559. UNSC Concord Naval Air Base, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Newest Arrival," Planet Earth.\*\*\*\*

"Better hoof it, Hawk!" Captain Brandon Heat shouted behind his buddy. "You don't want to be late!" Then he grinned. "If you are, Cooper might just kill you while she's in labor."

"Don't say that!" Willis yelled back, wondering fleetingly if that might actually be a possibility. He'd received the call while the air wing been out on flight maneuvers, and he'd only had just enough time to land and race to the base hospital, still wearing his flight suit and gloves. Heat had come along just because, always his wingmate to the end.

They raced through the entrance doors in their bulky gear, Hawk's helmet feeling unreasonably heavy in his left hand at the moment. He turned to his friend and handed it off to him, then said, a look of slight panic in his eyes, "I'm going to go find her room. I won't be able to leave, so if you could go get the kids and call my brother, I'd appreciate it."

"Sure thing, bud. Good luck."

"Thanks."

"It'll all be fine you know, you'll see." His friend smirked. "And next time, don't let the propaganda machine get to you, man."

Hawk frowned, confused. "What?"

"When they said the Colonies needed repopulating, that didn't mean you and Cooper had to do it all yourselves."

Willis laughed, glad for the momentary reprieve. "Well, somebody's gotta do it, right? What can I say, we're patriots."

Heat laughed, too. "I guess so. This is what, kid number four, five now?" He gestured up ahead with his chin. "Go get to your lady."

As the major dashed off down the hallway, he thought, \_This kid just had to come early, huh? Now where's Natalie? \_He tore off his gloves as he half ran, half speed-walked to the maternity ward and shoved them in his pockets. He spotted the sign down the hall and thought, \_There it is.\_

He took in a deep breath, realizing for the first time that he was nervous. He didn't know why he should be. This wasn't the first time he'd been here with Natalie. Wasn't his second time, either. Things had always gone smoothly before, so there was no reason to think they wouldn't now, too.\_ Man up, \_he thought to himself.\_ Stop being so anxious and go be by her side. She needs you right now, to be strong and calm and present.\_

With that he walked up to the reception desk and stood impatiently as the woman behind the counter sat on her datapad, probably reviewing another patient's files. Finally, he said, "Excuse me. I'm Major Willis Hawk. I'm looking for my wife's room number. I just got a call she was going into labor and I need to get to her right away."

"Name?" the receptionist asked in a bored tone.

"I just told you, it's Major Haw - "

"Your \_wife's\_ name, sir."

Hawk's face went a little red. "Oh, right. Lieutenant Colonel Natalie Cooper."

She searched through the rosters and nodded. "Yup, here she is. She was just admitted a half-hour ago. She's in room twelve."

"Room twelve," Willis repeated. "Got it! Thanks!"

The major ran off to the room, trying to avoid the stares that followed him. When he arrived he knocked on the door, and a nurse clad in scrubs came out.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah, I'm Major Hawk. The lieutenant colonel's my wife."

"Oh." His face brightened. "I'll let her know you're here, sir. She's been asking for you. Let me take you in the back real quick to get you prepped and get some scrubs on you, then you can come inside."

"Thanks."

\* \* \*

><p>When he came in, Natalie was already looking tired and sweaty from the contractions. He knew from her past experiences that it'd

only get worse from here, unfortunately, and the only thing he could do about that was be beside her to help her through it. It was the toughest part about watching her bring a new life into the world - there was nothing he could do himself to ease her pain.<p>

"Cooper," he said softly as he came up next to the bed and took her hand. "I'm here."

For a moment she was too emotional to speak, so she just squeezed his hand in greeting, letting him know through the touch that she was relieved to finally have him with her.

"How're you doing?"

"Been...better. The kids?"

"On their way now. I sent Heat to go get them. They'll be fine."

Her mouth curled into a small smile before another contraction hit and her face contorted in pain. She growled low in her throat and didn't open her eyes again until it had passed. "Christ," she groaned when it was over. "I'd rather be shot than this."

Willis chuckled. "It'll be over before you know it. And last time you were pushing out twins. It's gotta be better than that, right?"

"I don't know. This kid is giving them a run for their money. It's been blinding pain from start to finish." She paused again as another contraction went through her, and this time she sagged against the bed when it ended. "They say it's supposed to get easier with each baby. This is not easier."

The doctor walked back into the room just as another wave of pain hit her. He looked at Hawk for information.

"How is she?"

"Doing okay, I think." Although she was already squeezing the hell out of Willis's hand. He figured it'd go numb long before their baby was born.

"All right. Cooper, can you tell me if you want that epidural? This is going to be your last chance."

"No, sir," she struggled to say.

"Okay. Well, you're dilated seven centimeters now. This baby's going to be coming out fairly soon."

The contractions were coming in faster and more intensely now. Natalie was sweating profusely and crying out with each one, her shoulder-length brown hair matted to her forehead as she pushed. Willis did his best to soothe her any way he could - but mostly, it was just a matter of waiting it out.

Two hours passed, then three. At the fourth hour Willis wondered if the kid was ever going to come out. She'd been in labor much longer with the twins five years ago, but it seemed like this was, inexplicably, causing her more pain. Hawk couldn't wait for it to be over with, and he wasn't even the one going through the physical part

of it. \_I want to see my new daughter soon...or son, \_he thought. This had been the first time the pair had opted not to find out the baby's sex beforehand, so it was going to be a surprise for both whenever the baby came out.

Close to the five-hour mark, Cooper struggled through one last, final push, and Hawk finally heard their new child's cry.

"It's a boy!" the doctor announced, and Willis sat back dazed against the chair. He'd been so sure it was going to be a girl this time. Another little clone of her mother, just like Olivia was. Instead, he had a new son. He turned to Natalie and grinned.

"Natalie, did you hear that? We have a son."

She nodded with a weak grin but was too exhausted to say anything, falling back hard against the bed with her eyes closed, finally able to relax her tense muscles. After a long moment she opened her eyes again and looked at him, and Hawk leaned in to push the hair out of her face and kiss her.

"Thank you. For going through this again for us. I love you."

"Love you, too," she said quietly. "Where...is he? I want to see him."

"Soon. The nurses are cleaning him up first."

In a few minutes the nurse came back with the baby swaddled up in a familiar blue blanket. \_Three boys and one girl,\_ Hawk thought to himself. \_It's going to be a wild ride the next few years, that's for sure.\_

His thoughts ceased when the nurse placed their small son in Natalie's arms. The infant was little due to being nearly a month early, but he looked vibrant and strong. He was still red from the birth and Willis couldn't help but smile down at his new baby. Natalie must've felt the same, because her cheeks were suddenly streaked with tears.

"Hi, baby," she whispered to him. "It's nice to finally meet you, my new little man."

"Yeah," Hawk said in a low voice. "And you're going to have many more people to meet soon, too. Your brothers and sister are waiting outside to say hi."

Cooper smiled down at their son, then looked up at Willis. "Well? What should we name him?"

Hawk chuckled. "It's a good thing we finally decided on two boy names last night, huh? I thought for sure he was going to be a girl."

"Me, too," Natalie said with a grin. "You surprised us, kid." She returned her gaze to him. "So? Logan then?"

Willis nodded. "Yeah. Logan Mitchell Hawk."

"I'll get that written down," the nurse, still in the room, said. "I'll give you two a few more minutes, and then mom and baby need a



rest."

"Sure thing," Hawk replied.

\* \* \*

><p>True to his word, the nurse came to gather up the baby less than ten minutes later. Cooper was already struggling to stay awake, but she powered through it until the baby was lifted carefully from her arms. As they were taking Logan away, though, Hawk reached out to the nurse.<p>

"I'll take him," he said. "I promise to let him sleep. I'd just like to hold him for a while."

The nurse hesitated for a brief second, then nodded and gently handed the infant over to his dad. "Just ten more minutes," he whispered, keeping his voice low. By then, Natalie was knocked out.

The nurse disappeared and with Cooper asleep, Willis had the chance to sit back quietly in the dim lighting with his baby son. He brought the child's face to his and kissed his forehead, then settled him back against his chest. "Welcome to the family, Logan," he said quietly.

Logan went to sleep in Willis's arms nearly as fast as Cooper had a minute ago. That made Hawk smile. Like mother like son, and he wasn't even an hour out of the womb yet.

In the quiet of the room, it almost jarred the major when he heard a faint buzzing sound coming from the closet, where Cooper's clothes and belongings were from when she got admitted. Not wanting the noise to disturb either his wife or his son, Willis carefully got up out of the chair and went to check it out.

He soon found himself glancing down at Cooper's glowing datapad - the clear culprit. She had one new message. Out of curiosity, he opened it.

\_To: Lieutenant Colonel Natalie M. Cooper, Commanding Officer 52nd Combat Regiment, 1st Marine Division, UNSC Marine Corps\_

\_From: Major General Nohavi Lotus, Vice Chair of Academics, Pensacola Advanced Warfare College, Pensacola, Florida, United States. North American Territory, UNSC Marine Corps\_

\_Subject: Your Request for Reinstatement\_

\_Message:\_

\_Lieutenant Colonel Cooper,\_

\_I've received a full report of your actions on both [REDACTED] and here at home, in South Carolina and Georgia. You have also received a stellar letter of recommendation from Brigadier General Aiden Bolowsky about your involvement in the Earth campaign as his XO.\_

\_After careful review, we have determined that your superiors - including the continued support of Rear Admiral Dartmouth and Captain

Rhodes - have only the utmost respect for your tactical mind, your perseverance, and your leadership abilities, as well as your tireless efforts on behalf of the UNSC Marine Corps and humanity as a whole. As such, I am proud to extend an invitation for you to return to Pensacola War College in the fall, once you return from maternity leave. You will have to restart your training, of course, but somehow I don't think that will be a problem for you.\_

\_Best regards,\_

\_Major General Nohavi Lotus, Vice Chair of Academics\_

The message made Willis immediately grin. He glanced down at his son and said softly, "Hear that, Logan? Mommy's going back to school again. She's going to be very happy when she wakes up and sees this."

With that he turned the datapad off and placed it back in the closet. Soon, the nurse was going to come back in to take Logan away. And before that happened, the kid had several members of his family to meet.

Entering the room quietly, Willis watched as Matthew got permission from the staff to usher in Gabriel, Liam, and Olivia to meet their new little brother. For young kids, Hawk was impressed with their ability to stay as close to silent as possible as they came over to his side to see the newborn.

"Hey, guys. Your mom and the baby are sleeping now. But this is your new brother, Logan. You can say hi to him, but not too loud, okay?"

"Hi, Logan," they said, their whispers not exactly quiet, but not enough to disturb either of them. Willis smiled and leaned against the railing to Cooper's bed.

"Hey, Coop," he murmured. "Gang's all here when you wake up. All six of us now. And I've got some more good news for you when you're ready."

It'd been a long time since he'd been able to say that last part.

**\*\*THE END\*\***

#### 54. Closing Author's Note

**\*\*Closing Author's Note\*\***

Whew! That was crazy. I'm so sorry my updating schedule has been so sporadic for this story. Things were very very busy the past...gosh, year or so, with me getting married, then having a family emergency, then working a million hours a day after that. I apologize that all that real life stuff spilled over into the fic, and made for some long delays in between at times. But hey, at least we got to the end, right? ;D

Before anyone asks, yes, there's more planned. With Halo 5 coming out I can bet there will be more new canon plots to fuel the Cooper

series, and in the meantime, I have some of my own cooked up. So expect to see Story 7 up soon, if you want it. :)

As always, a MAJORLY HUGE THANKS TO ALL MY READERS AND REVIEWERS! You guys are awesome, truly, and it's all your wonderful comments, hits, favorites, and alerts that keep me and this project going. So once again, thank you all, from the bottom of my heart.

I hope you enjoyed, and I hope to see you on the next outing!

End  
file.